

affection

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K-Pop star Shindou Hikaru is on vacation visiting her grandfather when she's hit in the face with an ancient goban and a go-playing ghost all in the same day. Fem!Hikaru/Touya

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[Introduction](#)

[Four Walls \(넌네네네\) - f\(x\)](#)

[sometimes \(넌넌\) - 넌넌 of 15&](#)

[I - TAEYEON 넌넌](#)

[Why - TAEYEON 넌넌](#)

[넌넌 \(HANGANG\) - Hoody_ \(넌넌\)](#)

[I Know - 넌넌 \(Feat SUMIN\)](#)

[Something New - TAEYEON 넌넌](#)

[Maybe It's Not Our Fault - Yerin Baek넌넌넌](#)

[Across the Universe - Yerin Baek넌넌넌](#)

Four Walls (네가네가네가네가) - f(x)

K-Pop star Shindou Hikaru is on vacation visiting her grandfather when she's hit in the face with an ancient goban and a go-playing ghost all in the same day. Fem!Hikaru

The art for k-pop star fem!Hikaru is real. I'll try to post a link but ffnet hates links. Anyway I (obviously) do not know very much about Go, even if I write far too much about it, and I'm not all that better with k-pop, although researching both has been fun. But for those of you who know kpop, I've pretty much inserted Hikaru in fx as Sulli.

Chapter 1: Four Walls (네가네가네가네가) - f(x)

Track 1:

Destiny

Hoody

Hikaru normally believed in fate.

She didn't necessarily believe it to be preordained, but she did think things happened for a reason, even if they didn't make much sense at the time. When she was ten years old her parents divorced and it truly seemed like the end of the world; her father got remarried, she and her mother moved to Korea, and she had to move schools, make new friends and learn a new language all in the same year. But if that had never happened, she never would have discovered her love for dancing. And then again, when her mother got remarried and decided to move to America, the decision to finish school in Korea had been the most painful one she had ever made. But if she hadn't, she would have never had the opportunity to sign for a record

label, get the chance to be a trainee for a hugely popular recording studio, be part of a cutting edge girl's group...

At any rate, she wouldn't be where she was without this selection of decisions that, in hindsight, seemed both overwhelmingly significant and absolutely arbitrary.

Despite this, she had a really hard time believing this was happening to her right now.

Hikaru pressed the ice pack to her cheek, really hoping it wasn't going to bruise. She pulled it away to examine her reflection in the hallway mirror; red and splotchy, which could have meant anything. With a grimace she placed the pack against her cheek again, pivoting smartly on one foot as she sighed into her phone.

"I'm not joking, Sunyoungiee~," she complained loudly. "How does this stuff happen to me?"

"Because you're supremely lazy." Her groupmate replied, succinct and utterly unsympathetic. "I bet you anything there was a ladder in that shed-but did you use it? Of course not. You just tugged something from a shelf above you and hoped nothing was on top of it."

Hikaru scowled. Yes, that was exactly what happened, but hell if she admitted that aloud. "I hope it doesn't bruise." She said instead.

Honestly, what were the odds that a goban of all things would be on the top of the shelf? Before she knew it as she's been tugging out an old box of photos the stupid thing slid right off the top to hit her in the face.

"Me too." Luna snorted. "We have the elle shoot in two weeks!"

Hikaru made a vague noise of agreement. It would be awful, but not completely irreparable.

She chatted with her group mate for a bit longer, before Luna had to run off to visit some family of her own. It wasn't often that they got to have down time like this, so all the girls had jetted off to see family around the world.

Finally she hung up, tucking her phone back into the back pocket of her jeans and deciding she had ignored the elephant in the room long enough.

It wasn't actually an elephant, but Hikaru would have preferred a large, hairless and smelly mammal in this case.

"So, are you going to tell me your name?" She addressed to the sullen ghost in the corner.

He looked up at her with the expression of a miserable, kicked puppy. "I'm sorry I hurt you." He said sadly, in response.

Hikaru sighed. "It was an accident-and not actually your fault! Just don't tell anyone I said that." She added hastily.

The ghost smiled a bit at that. "So you admit it, then."

"I may have acted a bit rashly." Hikaru allowed. "But whatever, I was in a hurry. Anyway, so who are you?"

He picked himself to his full height. Hikaru was a little taken aback by how tall he was, until she realized he was floating a bit. That, and his clothing made him seem about five times larger than a real person. From his clothes alone she could tell he was misplaced in time, and that was to say nothing about the fact he was see-through.

"My name is Fujiwara no Sai." He bowed low. "It is an honor to meet you."

"Sai?" She repeated, blinking. Hikaru smiled. "Well, isn't that a coincidence?"

The ghost looked up, confused. "Eh?" The expression made him seem about ten years younger than the cordial look he'd had on when he had been formally introducing himself. It was still taking Hikaru a little bit to wrap her head around the fact that there was a ghost in front of her, and that ghost happened to have facial features. And expressions. And feelings, apparently.

Hikaru shook her head, chuckling under her breath. "My stage name is Cy. It's pronounced the same."

He brightened. "Ah! Are you a performer, then? Like Kibuki theater?"

Hikaru's laugh turned a little strained. "Um. Sure, yeah. Something... like that. So-you're clearly not from this time period. Or any time period that's happened in recent history."

Sai nodded his head vehemently. "That is correct. I am from-I believe you refer to it as the Heian period."

Hikaru choked. "What?"

Sai's tale would have been so outlandish it would have been unbelievable if Hikaru wasn't already having the most bizarre day of her short life. After waking up on the musty floor of her grandfather's shed to a worried, frantic voice asking if she was okay, she had sort of given up this day as a lost cause. That was probably for the best, because it didn't look to be getting any more coherent as it went on.

Apparently Sai was a former Go instructor for the Emperor. That would explain why he had been haunting a hulking block of wood. That Goban had apparently belonged to Honinbo Shusaku-the Go Saint, as he was called these days. So this wasn't Sai's first rodeo around, haunting people and what not. He promised he didn't mean any harm; his only wish was to play Go. A wish he held so fervently that he had haunted this world for over a thousand years.

Yeah, Hikaru could believe that.

She found herself unwillingly impressed by his dedication. She'd always thought she'd been very dedicated in her training, trying to be the best performer she could be. But Hikaru wasn't sure she'd ever go as far as to haunt the world of the living for over a thousand years to make that happen.

It was a good thing her grandfather was still at the neighbor's house gossiping about the new neighbors down the street, because she wouldn't have any idea how to explain away her current situation; sitting in front of his goban, playing with the air itself.

After listening to his convoluted-and if she was being honest, incredibly heart-wrenching-tale, she had agreed to at least play a game with him. As it turned out, she doubted they'd ever get around to playing an actual game. At least, not today. Not only did Hikaru not know a damn thing about how to play the game of Go, she also didn't know a damn thing about it, *period*. She spent at least fifteen minutes just counting the sides of the board up and down to figure out where to put the stones for Sai. And that was just for him to teach her the mechanics, let alone actually playing it.

Okay, so it was a bit harder than it looked. But Hikaru had good muscle memory; it came with years of dance routines. She'd get this down in no time.

'No time' ended up being by the time her grandfather moseyed his way back home, stuffed full with snacks and dirty secrets. Sai was actually impressed by how quickly Hikaru had managed to memorize the board, but it was clear she still had a long, long way to go.

Her grandfather was taken by surprise to see his only grandchild lounging on the back porch, go stone in hand.

"You hold that thing like a pro!" He laughed when he saw her.

Hikaru looked up, stirring out of her thoughts. She smiled slightly, holding her hand out to examine the pearly white go stone in between her forefinger and middle finger. She'd gotten the hang of it

about halfway through-it had felt odd at first, but Hikaru had always been good at picking up things like that.

"If only I could play like one too." She laughed slightly, placing the stone down where Sai had told her to.

He peered over her to get a closer look at the board. "Oh? What's this you're recreating?"

Hikaru froze for a split second, before thinking quickly and whipping out her phone. "I was just looking up a game," she lied, knowing he wouldn't call her out on it. Her grandfather still had a flip phone, and even then he barely knew how to use it. The idea of the mobile phone as a technology platform capable of the same kind of performance as a computer utterly bewildered him. But then, computers still bewildered him too.

As she expected, he only shook his head. "Kids these days..." He muttered, putting into the living room.

After a moment of shuffling he returned with a thick book. Hikaru watched him curiously.

"Here, if you're going to be recreating things-this is a book of Shusaku's kifu; he was one of the best, you know."

"Shusaku...?" She repeated. Hikaru smiled sheepishly. "Oh! Right. Shusaku. You wouldn't happen to have anyone else, would you?" And then, to his outraged face. "It's just-you can find all his stuff for free online! Do you have any books on someone, um, like less popular?"

That probably wasn't even a lie, but all the same she couldn't tell him that she was currently hosting the ghost of Shusaku already, and a book of his kifu would be moot at this point.

Her grandfather grumbled something about seeing it in person and seeing it on a screen being too different to compare, but Hikaru only

rolled her eyes.

" *I don't know about that,*" Sai said with big eyes, in response to her grandfather, hiding most of his face behind his fan. " *This little block of yours is very informative, if a bit... loud.*"

Hikaru rolled her eyes again. " *That's youtube for you.*" She agreed. But she didn't know of any other place to watch someone explain fuseki with a puppet show of all things. Sai had really gotten a kick out of that.

"Ah ha!" Heihachi returned after a beat, hefting an even larger book, if that was possible. "This here is a good one! I'd forgotten I had it, actually."

Hikaru took it from him curiously, examining the title. "The brilliance and clarity of Minoru Kitani?"

She flipped it around to read the summary. She had no idea what any of these accolades might mean, but after seeing the dates of his life and doing the math, she decided it was as good as any. Maybe it would be good for Sai to get some exposure to more modern Go.

"This looks great." She said, turning it back to its front. "Thanks, grandpa!"

He grinned at her. "No need to thank me; just return it in good shape, you hear? And play me once you've learned a few things."

"Good idea." Hikaru nodded with a laugh. "Dinosaurs probably play faster than me at the moment."

By the time Hikaru had returned to her hotel room, she felt as if she'd been in choreography practice all day long. Who knew Go could be exhausting? She'd stopped by a convenience store to inhale some food, before returning to her hotel to pour over youtube videos of Go games the way she did with new k-pop music videos. Of course, that

wasn't to say she didn't distract herself with a lot of those too. Sai's only experience with the future thus far was new go strategies and new k-pop moves. Hikaru felt this to be surprisingly sufficient, given the state of things.

She'd tried to explain things as they took the train back to downtown, where she was staying at a hotel, but Sai was either far too bewildered or just in plain disbelief. He refused to believe that people had been to the moon, and despaired over the lack of innovation in umbrella designs.

And he thought k-pop was absurd.

"This isn't theater!" He had protested vehemently, when Hikaru attempted to explain what it was.

"I-I know that." She agreed hastily. "That's just the uh, closest comparison I can think of."

"I'll say!" Sai harrumphed, folding his arms. "How did things change so much since Torajiro's time? You know, even then I still understood things."

Hikaru wasn't sure how to explain away modern society, so instead she had just returned to more Go tutorials and kifu. Sai had quickly changed his tune about the sordid and appalling internet when Hikaru explained he could find almost every Go game ever recorded inside of it.

At any rate, teaching herself a new game that apparently took years of study to fully appreciate-and teaching Sai all about the future full of the internet and mobile phones and k-pop, was utterly exhausting.

Hikaru fell asleep to her own vague promises about continuing on tomorrow, and woke up in yesterday's clothes with a half unpacked suitcase and a completely upturned room that she had yet to fix-oh, and a ghost in the corner, looking exuberant at seeing her open her eyes, ready to pounce on the day.

It took Hikaru a shower and at least two cups of tea to even consider herself human enough to combat the day, and even then she was at a loss.

Did yesterday really happen? One look at the bouncing ghost by her side told her that yes, yes it did.

After an order for room service, Hikaru shoved away all the sneakers and makeup on the unused side of her bed to prop herself up with pillows, laptop in hand. She ignored all the new emails that had found their way into her inbox with the light of morning, and instead returned to where she left off in her summary of the game of Go. A summary that had, sadly, barely passed Atari.

She'd been watching for hours, but was no closer to figuring it out than she had been when she started. And Sai, sitting beside her, eagerly watching and waiting for the moment she could turn around and start to play him, was not helping. She understood that he'd been waiting for a long time-a couple decades long, actually-so Hikaru could see why he'd be so overeager, but it was starting to make her impatient too.

Room service came and went, and after Hikaru had picked sufficiently at breakfast, she closed her laptop with great finality.

"Okay, this isn't working." She announced, to her ghost companion.

Sai's eyes grew wide and wet. "What do you mean?" He protested. "The man in the box was just explaining a Hane-

"I mean, it's not working for me. It will, I'm sure, in like, a few weeks, but I can tell you're itching for a game right now."

Sai looked like he might protest this too, before finally closing his mouth. He nodded miserably. "I apologize for my impatience." He demurred, eyes lowering. "I didn't mean to offend you-

Hikaru waved him off, plucking another strawberry before hopping off the bed. "Sai, it's fine, really. We'll just have to find someone else for you to play at the moment."

Sai immediately brightened. "Really?" His eyes lit up. "But, would that be alright?"

"Sure, sure." Hikaru nodded genially, casting a wary eye about the room as she surveyed her wardrobe.

Her first thought was to haul back through town to grandpa's house. At least there she'd be in the relative comfort of somewhere she knew, away from prying eyes. She wasn't exactly *famous* over here- definitely not like she was in Korea, where it was impossible to get very far without a fan or a paparazzi taking photos-but all the same there were quite a few people who had come up to ask for an autograph already, and she'd prefer not to have to deal with that. But then she'd have to explain to her grandfather how she went from completely incompetent yesterday to Go-playing genius today, and she didn't think youtube would suffice as an acceptable answer this time.

So that just meant she'd have to opt for some kind of disguise.

"First things first though," Hikaru clapped her hands with a sparkle in her eye. "I need to change."

Sai had clearly underestimated what a daunting task this would be.

Even growing up in the Heian era, where people wore far more clothing, did far more elaborate things with their hair, and had far more etiquette to remember, no one had ever taken this long. They certainly didn't have that many clothes to chose from, as a start, but Hikaru had so many tools in her beauty arsenal it was starting to make Sai's head spin.

He took the ample free time as an opportunity to observe the future in its natural element; Shindou Hikaru, pop star and idol.

She flittered about the room, holding elaborate garments in all assortments of styles up to her figure in the mirror, posed, and then threw them over her shoulder. Some looked effeminate, others complicated, and some just plain bizarre. It was clear the future had many different styles of attire-some more modest than others; absolutely none of them resembling anything Sai could recall.

Hikaru had decided on what she assured him was an 'out-to-do-errands look with enough casual street-punk to drown a Tokyo drift star' (whatever that meant) which constituted of black pants (leggings) and very, very white shoes with ribbons of some kind holding them together (sneakers) a hooded top (hoodie) and a black hat (beanie). She had a lot of words for things that already had words to describe them, Sai digressed. She also sung along to things that came out of that magical box of hers, and danced around the bathroom as she did her makeup. That, at least, Sai remembered.

From what Sai could understand, things had changed... a lot. And yet, Go was still played-still loved. This was more than enough to bring a bright smile to Sai's face. The future was more than he could have ever imagined, and Go still thrived.

By the time Hikaru pronounced that she was ready to go, Sai was worried they'd already missed most of the day. Hikaru assured him they had plenty of time, before hopping out of her room and down the elevator.

He was still casting wide eyes about the world when they finally made it down onto the street, Hikaru pattering about on that little box of hers.

Finally, she made a triumphant noise.

" *Found it!*" She grinned up at him. " *It says here there's actually a salon nearby!*"

" *Says where?*" Sai peered curiously over her shoulder, but the glare from the sun had made the glass light up until he could see nothing but white.

Hikaru waved him off. " *I promise I'll explain to you the wonders of technology some other day,*" she assured, bounding away. " *But right now, let's just hope it's right.*"

Sai leapt after her. " *There's a chance it's wrong?*" He asked with a gasp.

Hikaru, however, was no longer paying attention. Her focus was buried in that little device, and every once in a while she'd look up to confer street signs or landmarks. Sai decided that there must be some kind of map in there-moving paintings in one moment, directions the next... Sai could sufficiently say the future was more than he could have ever hoped. And they still played Go!

After a while wandering the streets, Hikaru eventually came to a stop in front of an unsuspecting office building, peering up at the signs outside. A dentistry, a few establishments she couldn't discern... she squinted. And yes! There was a sign for a go salon. Perfect.

" *Here it is, Sai .*" Hikaru grinned. " *A Go salon. You ready ?*"

" *More than !*" Sai clapped his hands.

Hikaru ducked inside, making her way down the halls until she found the salon. The inside was... nice. Relieving. Hikaru remembered many a go salon from her days being babysat by grandpa, and they all left much to be desired. In hindsight, that probably said more about her grandfather than it did the state of the go world. He would've picked somewhere that would have let him smoke inside, and somewhere all his old geezer buddies would be allowed to growl

around and drink and smoke and debate moves. In other words, the last place he should be bringing his young granddaughter.

At any rate, this establishment was almost the exact opposite. Nice and big, and clean. It didn't smell like smoke, and there was a lovely, polite lady minding the counter who ushered her in when she saw Hikaru standing there dumbfounded.

"Hi," she greeted. "Is this your first time?"

"Erm-yeah, sort of. It's been a while." Hikaru replied, flushing. Or maybe more like one-thousand years.

The clerk took it in stride, nodding her head as she pointed at a binder below her. "Well, just write your name in here, and your rank... or, do you not know what your rank is?"

Hikaru shook her head. "I'm afraid I don't." She admitted. "But, I'm certain I'm very good."

She raised a brow. "Certain, huh?" She repeated, drily.

Hikaru had a feeling she was being patronized. "Incredibly." She bit out, miffed. The woman laughed at her, only annoying her further. In the clerk's defense, Hikaru wasn't exactly helping her argument. The woman probably she thought she was here to impress some boy or something like that.

"Well, you can leave it blank for now if you don't know." She stifled a giggle. "Why don't you find someone to play with? I can help you if you don't know anyone..."

After paying the fee, Hikaru looked around, wondering how difficult it would be to ask someone for a game. They all looked quite a ways older than her, but still friendly enough. Still, a great majority of them were already playing with friends, or crowded around someone else's game.

Finally a boy her age caught her eye. He looked like he'd been helping some of the other patrons out, leaning over their board as he spoke to them. He straightened, probably feeling someone's gaze on him, and turned around.

Realizing it was impolite to just stare, Hikaru waved. He tentatively waved back.

The clerk behind her made a strangled noise. "Oh. Well. That's-

But he was already coming over.

"-You would have been better off playing a pincer here instead-" Touya Akira was in the midst of saying, placing a black stone to prove his point.

The two patrons beneath him made vague noises of comprehension. Wakakusa-san laughed heartily. "An excellent observation as always, Touya-sensei." He beamed. "Thank you for the help."

Akira bowed his head. "Of course."

He felt a prickle against his neck and he straightened up, wondering if someone else needed his help. He didn't mind when people called him over for the occasional teaching lesson, even though he normally came to his father's salon to be able to peacefully study kifu. But then, if he really wanted total silence without interruption, he was better off going home. However Akira tended to enjoy the low murmurs of other people around him; it made him feel... less alone. Unfortunately that came with the flip side of having customers come up to him asking him questions.

But the gaze he found was definitely not an elderly customer asking for his opinion or assistance.

For a long moment, Akira simply stared.

He knew it was impolite, but he had simply been caught off guard. In his defense she was... incredibly pretty. Pretty like the kind of girls at his school who only ever talked to themselves or the boys who played baseball-prettier, even. She had an aura of calm and confidence that he'd never quite seen on any girls his age.

Well, it was equally as impolite to simply stare at her from across the room, so with a steady gait he picked his way through the tables, making for the front entrance.

"Akira-san," Harumi greeted, looking a tad flustered. "This is, um-

"Hikaru," she stuck out her hand. "Shindou Hikaru."

He shook it. "Touya Akira."

"Right," Harumi laughed nervously. "So this is Shindou-san, and she's-

"I'm looking for a game." Hikaru talked over her, smiling. "Are you free?"

Akira wasn't used to girls being forward normally, but actually it was a bit relieving. Half his problem with the girls his age was that he simply had no idea how to talk to them, and they were never very forthcoming.

"Sure, follow me."

" *Bingo!*" Hikaru cheered in her head. " *Look at that Sai, easy, huh?*"

Sai spared her a nonplussed look. " *I think Hikaru has ulterior motives.*"

" *What motives?*"

" *Bad motives,*" Sai pouted. " *Picking the young, handsome boy...*"

Hikaru laughed heartily. " *Well, come on Sai, it's not fair if only you get to have fun!*" She winked at her ghost. " *At least this way we'll both be entertained.*"

Sai gasped, scandalized. " *Hikaru! How improper...*"

But Hikaru only continued to be amused. Sai had a lot to learn.

Touya led her to a table in the back, a bit removed from the noise of the rest of the parlor. She sat down curiously, realizing a bit belatedly that this was going to be the first game of Go she'd ever played.

"Is a four stone handicap alright?" He asked, as he removed the goke lids.

"Handicap?" Well for her, she'd probably need a hell of a lot more, and it was probably rather courteous of him to ask, but for Sai's sake she pretended to be affronted. "But we're the same age!"

"Well, right..." He looked caught of guard.

Hikaru rose a cool brow, smiling slyly. "You better not be trying to go easy on me because I'm a girl."

Touya flushed spectacularly. "I-I would never-

"Great!" Hikaru beamed. "So, no handicap is okay? Nigiri?"

He looked as if he wasn't sure how this conversation got away from him so quickly, nodding wordlessly. Hikaru chuckled to herself. Poor kid didn't know who he was dealing with here. Hikaru was the master of being manipulative.

Touya grabbed a handful of white stones, still looking a tad forlorn, if not sheepish. This, at least, Hikaru knew how to do; she put down two stones.

" *Black,*" Sai noted, sounding delighted. " *I've never lost with black !*"

" But they didn't have komi back then, right?"

Sai stilled. *" Ah... good point ."* He agreed, after a beat. *" I had almost forgotten about that new rule, I was so excited to play. Yes, hm, this will certainly change things ."*

He'd lost Hikaru at that point, so she simply waited patiently for him to ponder.

" No matter," he shook his head, breaking his silence. *" I think I still want to start with the diagonal ."*

" Diagonal-yeah, okay, sure. How do I play that again?"

Sai chuckled, tapping with his fan. *" Put your first stone here."*

Hikaru snuck a glance at Touya-he looked like he was trying to be patient, but was inwardly regretting his decision to play her. Don't worry, Hikaru wanted to say. I promise this game will get interesting. At some point. It might take a while, considering how many times Hikaru had double checked she'd played the stone at the right spot. But she had a feeling Sai was going to be utterly amazing.

Meanwhile, as Hikaru studied the board, Akira studied her.

She had started with Shusaku's diagonal, which had surprised him. It certainly wasn't a bad move, but it hadn't been what he'd expected. To that end, he wasn't entirely sure *what* he'd been expecting. Shindou was... not the kind of person who normally wandered in here. He found himself less interested in the game at hand and more at her-why was she even here? Maybe she was killing time between appointments; maybe she was waiting for someone else to show up, an uncle, or grandfather maybe; maybe she was meeting her boyfriend? Akira paused. Why was he even thinking that? At any rate, he couldn't quite figure it out. Maybe she liked playing Go; maybe she went around the city to all the different parlors, aimlessly challenging people.

Her joseki was outdated, but all the same she was a good player. Better than he had expected from his first impression of her. She was about as good as the girls in the Kaio Go club, who had sometimes come up to him after class or during lunch to ask him for a game. They stopped pretty quickly with that once they realized he was going to take them as seriously as he would anyone else.

He found his eyes wandering to her again. He didn't mean to, but his eyes found hers again. Her dark lashes were lowered, a strip of contemplative, focused green bright and burning beneath. She had really nice eyes, he found himself thinking, inanely.

Wow, this really wasn't like him. Akira shook his head, focusing back on the game.

Hm, should he let her continue her shape in the upper corner? He could block it now with a cut, but it might be better to let her...

Hold on.

He looked back down at the board.

Was he missing something?

And then she played a hand far out into uncharted territory, closer towards the bottom of the board. For a moment, he simply dismissed it as a poor move. But after further contemplation, he wondered if it was intentional or not. It wasn't a move he expected, really, it wasn't even a good move. But he couldn't understand her motivations. It wasn't helping her expand her territory, or fortify her shape. It almost seemed... arbitrary.

Had she played it accidentally? Was she trying to lay a trap?

Or maybe-

Akira looked up sharply. The girl's features gave nothing away.

Was she testing him?

Just who was this girl?

He felt a cold sweat break out on the back of his neck as his mind whirled through the possibilities. He dropped his stone back into the goke, his hands returning to his armrest as he mentally flickered back through the entire game. It couldn't be possible... had she been playing with him the whole time? Humoring him? *Tutoring* him? Was this shidou go?

It was true, she hadn't pressed the offensive at all. She'd fended him off, but not as aggressively as she could have. She'd let him control the pace, never once attempting to gain back sente. Her defense was, upon further inspection, perfectly deflecting him at every opportunity, but still she was responding, and he was still attacking. All the same, though he was winning, she was still holding him off from widening the gap. It almost felt like playing his father; like he was pushing against an indomitable force that wouldn't budge no matter what he did. It took all his efforts to get his father to go all out on him, otherwise he simply gently pushed Akira's advances, or shot him down outright. It wasn't that his father went easy on him-just as it was clear Shindou wasn't going easy on him either-he just didn't push the envelop anymore than he had to. Unless Akira forced his hand, there was no reason to.

He looked up at the girl again, gaze narrowing.

If that was the case, then he'd simply have to push her to show her true hand.

" *Just what did you do exactly, Sai?*" Hikaru thought curiously, as Touya continued to stare down at the board, looking like he had no intention of playing another move any time soon.

Sai smirked from behind his fan. " *Oh, just gave him something to think on.*"

Hikaru spared the boy a noncommittal glance. " *Huh .*" She shrugged. " *Well, how is he? Any good?*"

" *He's very impressive, especially for his age .*" Sai replied. " *I haven't quite figured out just how impressive-he's going easy on you.*"

Hikaru rolled her eyes. " *Of course he is.*"

" *To be fair, I haven't given him much adversity.*" Sai revealed. " *I've only been testing him so far.*"

At that, Touya played another hand, lightning fast, the stone hitting the board with an audible smack. Both Hikaru and Sai's brows shot up at the passionate display. " *I think he's done playing around.*" Hikaru noted, belatedly.

Sai chuckled. " *Now we'll really see just how good he is. 14-14.*"

Hikaru nodded diligently, placing the stone where Sai had commanded.

After that, the game was on.

" *Hikaru,*"

" *Hmm?*"

Even though she wasn't actually playing, she felt caught up in the excitement anyhow. Even without any knowledge of the game she could tell that this game had racked up in intensity, to the point it almost seemed tangible between them, thick and heavy in the air. Touya's laser sharp focus hadn't once left the board, his brow furrowed in concentration. Sai as well had gone quiet a few hands after their brief conversation, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. When he gave Hikaru commands, she couldn't decipher anything in his tone.

Sai snapped his fan shut. " *It's time for you to resign.*"

Hikaru blinked in shock. " *You lost?*"

The ghost shrugged. " *I really wasn't trying to win .*" He explained.

" *You weren't?*" Hikaru balked. " *Then what were you playing for ?*"

Sai gasped. " *There's more to Go then just winning or losing!*" He lectured. He straightened up, huffing and folding his arms. " *I was-teaching him, you could say. Evaluating him.*"

From a level far above him, went unsaid.

Hikaru sighed. Ah, well, guess it can't be helped then.

She dipped her head, just like she had seen in all the tutorial videos. "I resign."

She couldn't quite tell if she had done it right or not, because either way Touya seemed very surprised.

After a moment he recovered, his hand slipping away from his goke, where he had positioned it to retrieve another stone, as if anticipating another move from her. Just like that the spell was broken, and the determined, sharp features dissolved back into something sweet and polite. More than anything though, he just looked caught off guard.

"Thank you for the game." He answered on instinct, still looking surprised.

"You're-you're very talented." Touya added.

Hikaru blinked at him, her turn to be surprised. "Um, thanks. You know you won, right?" She pointed out with a laugh.

He looked at her carefully. "Yes, but..." He hesitated for a moment. "You were going easy on me." He accused.

"Was I?" Hikaru feigned ignorance, tilting her head. She laughed again at his pinched expression. "I wasn't, promise-I was just..."

What had Sai said? "Testing you." She finished with a wink.

It successfully threw him off, a flush creeping up his neck. "Oh. Well. That's..." He seemed to be at quite a loss for words.

"You're very talented," she tossed back, assuming it was true. Sai had said as much already. "How old are you?"

"I'm turning sixteen soon." He answered, looking at a loss for words and very out of his element.

Hikaru brightened. "No way! I'm fifteen too! What a coincidence!" She grinned. "Are you still in school, then?"

"Um..."

Hikaru shifted in her seat some, trying to scratch her shoulder. The movement dislodged her phone from her pocket, and with a gasp she hastily swiped it off the floor. Her stomach twisted when she turned it on to see she had at least a dozen missed calls from her manager. Shit.

"Oh shit, why did I turn it on silent?" she bemoaned, mostly to herself. She should know better by now.

Whatever it was, it must be important. He never called this much unless it was.

"I'm so sorry," she looked up at Touya, genuinely apologetic. "I really have to call him back."

"Oh, that's," he blinked. "Sure, of course."

Hikaru smiled at him gratefully, before darting out of her seat and ducking through the other patrons to make it towards the front door. She didn't want to interrupt all the other players while she was on the phone.

The dial tone rang for a few seconds, before her manager picked up. He had been trying to get a hold of her about a schedule change. Upper management had called to say they were pushing their next tour a few weeks later. Normally this would be a bit relieving for Hikaru; more time to train, more time to sleep and keep regular hours like a normal human being and not an idol-except they were pushing it back for more marketing time, which meant Hikaru would be equally as busy regardless.

Hikaru sighed; first things first, her manager wanted her to get in contact with a small-time Japanese fashion blogger for a quick interview, as soon as possible. It wouldn't do for her to be sitting idle here.

So much for a vacation.

She shook her head. In the world of idols, there really wasn't any such thing. Without any hesitation she picked up the phone to confirm a time for their interview.

" *Hi, is this Kei-san?*" She greeted as the call connected.

" *Um, yes. Might you be Shindou-san?*"

Hikaru spent another couple minutes pacing up and down the relatively deserted hallway, conversing with the blogger. It didn't seem like it would be a long event, but she did want to meet with Hikaru as soon as possible, before she left for fashion week. Hikaru ended up penciling in a time later in the afternoon-she'd have just enough time to sprint back to her hotel, shower, and then get in a cab to the designated meeting place. If she was lucky.

Hikaru said her goodbyes, already feeling stressed.

" *Hikaru is so busy,*" Sai noted, once she was done.

Hikaru nodded with a sigh. " *Always.*" She grouched.

Then she ducked back into the salon, making a beeline towards the boy still waiting for her at their table. She really regretted having to leave so soon; he was really quite cute. And she knew Sai was dying to discuss the game with him, so he probably felt something of the same.

"Touya-san?"

He looked up when she called his name.

"I'm really sorry, but it looks like I have to run." His expression fell a bit, but he nodded all the same.

"I see." He said, smiling slightly. "That's alright-thank you for the game."

She nodded. "Yeah, thanks for the game; it was great!"

With a wave, she bounded off, already checking her watch and cursing about the time.

Track 2:

Galaxy

Ladies Code

It wasn't until after that Akira cursed himself.

He had been so flustered by her he hadn't even thought to ask her for another match! How could he not, after this game? He could barely believe they were the same age; just who was she? How could she be so talented? And how had he never heard of her? Was she an insei? No... he would have at least heard of someone with that kind of power. Did she play for her school Go club? What school did she go to? He cursed himself again for not asking.

It only occurred to him after the fact that he didn't know a damn thing about her. He hadn't thought to ask.

He was really regretting that now.

How was he supposed to find her again?

Harumi sighed, finding herself at a loss. It was rare to see Akira both so passionate about something and so frustrated. Of course it had everything to do with a girl. She sighed again. She'd always thought she'd be his first crush, but the age for first crushes passed him by without even a hint of confirmation from Akira. There were never any girls, though not from lack of trying on their part. She'd picked him up a few times at school, only to see him conversing half-heartedly with a girl. He always looked both flustered and painfully awkward in those situations; it looked like this recent one was no different.

Of course, there had never been a girl that had made such a lasting impression on him either.

But that was to be expected, she thought. None of them had ever caught his attention with Go.

And this Shindou Hikaru seemed to have done a lot more than that.

Not that Harumi was surprised; she had been very pretty. Very trendy. Very nice, too. A perfect girl, in other words. And a little familiar, if Harumi thought on it deeply. But that might just be because she was wearing the cute clothes all the girls her age seemed to have, with that popular hairstyle they all seemed to have too. After a while they all seemed to look the same.

She turned her attention to the boy in question.

He was sitting in the same spot he had been for days, recreating the same game.

Harumi wondered what it was about the game-apparently, she had lost. She'd wandered over with the rest of the salon once the girl had left; there had been a lot of ribbing about the young master 'getting himself a girlfriend', a few questions on the nature of the game. It was close, but all the same she'd lost. That didn't seem to matter to Akira though; he was treating it like one of his Kisei league matches. Maybe there was something there that she just couldn't see.

Akira scowled to himself, playing the girl's pincer that had ruined his shape in the center.

The more he replayed the game, the more her true genius bled through. *I was just testing you*, she had said, so casually. At the time, he could see how she had been evaluating him, playing moves simply to see how he reacted-playing a game she had no intention of winning. Now though, he was beginning to realize the true extent of her words.

He was still having trouble believing in her existence.

The idea of someone his age being so powerful, maybe even more so than him, was an exhilarating one. He'd been uncontested for so long, rising through the ranks as a solitary presence. He'd assumed he'd only be able to find challenges from those above him-it had never occurred to him to stop and take a look around at those around him. There were no other pros his age that even came close. They weren't enough to make him stop and look.

Shindou Hikaru, though. She was more than enough.

He found his thoughts wandering from the game he had practically memorized these past couple days. His hand stilled above the board as it occurred to him that he *had* to find her. He couldn't... how could he have possibly let an opponent like her slip away?

To his surprise, this brief game was more than enough to completely make him forget about his loss to Ogata in the Honinbo league. A game like that-not to mention, Ogata's words to him after-would have

been clouding his thoughts for months. They should have, and yet here he was not even a week later and he'd actually forgotten that it had even happened. And it had only taken one game.

Not even a game, really. The two couldn't be compared.

One of them was played in a title tournament, against the current Juudan. The amount of pressure and intensity felt in those games simply couldn't be replicated anywhere else, the stakes were just too high. The other game was played on a casual, unsuspecting afternoon; it wasn't necessarily a friendly game, but there was no title on the line here, no infamous, renowned player sitting across from him. Just a beautiful girl he'd never met before.

There were only so many times Akira could replay a game before even he began to get frustrated. He'd analyzed her hands back and forth, picked them apart as judiciously and rigorously as he had every other important game he'd ever played.

Yes she was talented, impressively so; yes she was a complete surprise. But that shouldn't be enough to captivate him so.

It was more than just her play. He found himself seized by this unquenchable thirst, this fervid need to redeem himself, one that rivaled what he felt towards Ogata right now. He hadn't taken her nearly as seriously as she warranted, and it showed. Just how much better would this game be if he had played her all out? Just how far did her genius run? He'd scratched the surface, and what he had found amazed him. Now he was eager to dive even deeper. Just how powerful was she?

Unfortunately, all these questions came without answer, so all he could do was run in circles.

The day found Akira staring listlessly out the window of his last class of the day, wishing to be anywhere else.

He was always very studious, but he had no intentions of overexerting himself with his academic studies when he had league matches to worry about. He still went, of course, and applied himself to all his classes, but he had no urge to extend further than that. Despite this he normally found school at least somewhat relaxing; a novelty these days, considering how many days he skipped due to matches. Today however, he couldn't find it in him to be relaxed-he felt on edge. There was so much restless energy inside him and he had no outlet for it.

Students poured out of the Kaio buildings once school was over, bemoaning the weather and the humidity.

Akira paid them no mind, dodging past crowds of strolling students as he made his way to the train station. Sometimes Ichikawa would pick him up if he was on her way, but a pipe had broken on a floor above them and the salon was closed for the day while the repairmen fixed the damage. He might have stopped by otherwise, spending his afternoon as he had all week; reconstructing his game with Shindou Hikaru.

He sighed. At some point, he was going to have to let it go. He had to start preparing for his games-the games that actually mattered. He would be playing in the Kisei main tournament soon; it would be a good idea to start reviewing the recent games of the pros he knew would be in it.

To Akira's misfortune, about halfway to the station the skies opened up with a thunderous clap. The foot traffic around him cried aloud in dismay, everyone scattering about for shelter in the face of the sudden downpour.

Akira ducked through them, finding relief under a deserted bus stop.

He let out a breath, sparing a surveying glance down at himself. It looked like he had saved himself just in time. His gaze traveled out into the abysmal weather, the rain pelted down onto the bus stop roof with a deafening thunder; through the streaks of rain a seething

mist rose through the watery street lights, wandering about in place of the people.

He let out a long breath. Great.

He checked his watch, absently wondering just how long this shower would stay for. Hopefully it was just passing by. The traffic lights lit up in the onslaught of the downpour, the noise of irritated drivers fulminating even over the overbearing rain.

There was splashing from behind him, and then a drenched, hooded figure dove under the roof with him, heaving for breath.

"What a horrible rain."

Akira nodded his acquiescence, not really in the mood for small talk, but far too polite to ignore it. "Hopefully it stops soon."

"Too late." The figure bemoaned. "I'm already soaked."

He turned at that.

His breath caught.

A hand moved back to pull a soaking hood away from drenched blonde hair. A girl with striking features and remarkably green eyes stood beside him, dressed in workout clothes, halfheartedly shaking out water from her sleeves. She grimaced as she plucked an earbud out of her ear, the steady beat just barely audible above the rain and the traffic and the murmurs of people passing them by.

Shindou Hikaru rung out her limp ponytail with both hands, jumping out of the way of the ensuing waterfall that poured out.

"Shindou..."

She looked up then, bright green gaze catching his own. Her smile was genuine, but confused. Then a flicker of recognition passed her eyes. "Oh, Touya!" She greeted. "How are you?"

"You..." He couldn't quite believe this was happening, blinking at her in shock.

She looked him up and down. "You seem to have avoided the worst of it." She noted cheerfully.

"Good timing, I suppose." He found himself replying, despite his bewilderment.

Better than she even knew.

"I'll say." She laughed.

In spite of himself, Akira found himself just simply watching her. She didn't seem real, staring out into the endless sludge of Tokyo traffic, city lights casting against her face in glowing colors. Water clung to her lashes, she blinked a few times, until the droplets fell from her eyes like little diamonds falling to the floor.

"I've been looking for you." He blurted out.

For a moment, her expression didn't change. Then she blinked, turning to him. He flushed, only realizing after the fact how ridiculous that sounded.

"I mean-I just," he looked away, wondering if he could pass his flush off as a reaction to the humidity. It wasn't like him to be so... discomfited. He'd never felt so out of his element before. "I wanted to play you again."

"Oh." She said, after a beat. "Me too," she added, so casually. As if that didn't mean everything.

He turned back around at that. He thought on what to say, weeks worth of words rushing to the forefront of his mind. "I waited for you."

That was definitely *not* what he had intended.

"At the salon." He added. "I'm there almost every day. But you didn't return."

Shindou fidgeted, tugging at her waterlogged sleeve. "I've been busy." She hedged.

Akira hesitated. "Will you... would you come back?"

She shrugged. "If I can." Her smile was different, this time. Soft and nebulous. "I'm-I just, I have a hectic schedule."

He swallowed thickly. "Oh. I see."

This was very unlike him. Well, everything about this was unlike him, but in particular he was dumbfounded at his casual acceptance of this. He was never one to just let things happen-he pushed and shoved, aiming for his goals with a single-minded determination, and a willingness to move mountains to make them come to fruition. Yet he couldn't make himself do it now; he wanted to play her again, wanted a promise that she'd be there next time. But nothing came out.

When he chanced another glance at her, the smile had drifted away, as if it had wandered off in the gloom around them. Her eyes were lost in the distance. One of her hands was tangled in her headphone cord, winding it around.

Before he could stop himself, he was reaching for her hand. She startled at his touch, but made no move to take it back, even as he turned her palm over in his own.

He hadn't noticed before, but now it was clear as day. This wasn't the hand of a go player. Her hands were small and graceful, with long, perfectly manicured nails. There wasn't a single callous to be found on her palm.

"Um..."

After a beat, he released her hand, as she gently tugged it out of his grip. For a while, there was only the long, endless sound of rain.

"Have you ever thought of becoming a pro?"

Her gaze was incredulous at best. "No, never."

He frowned.

How could that be? Had no one ever told her just how talented she was?

"What about you?" She turned the question around. "Have you ever thought about it?"

"I already am." He didn't hesitate to answer.

Shindou's gaze flickered with surprise. "Oh."

"You could be too," he informed her. "You're more than good enough."

She smiled again, small and secretive. "Oh, I wouldn't be so sure about that."

He wasn't sure how to respond to that. What did she mean? Did she really not realize? He watched her deeply; she had turned away again, turned towards the washed out world outside their dry, diminutive universe, shifting restlessly in her shoes. Before he could reply, she spoke again, head tilted to the rain. "Do you want to play a game?"

He blinked, taken aback. "Right now?"

Her eyes slid towards him, smile turning coy. "What, you need a board, Mr. Professional?"

His eyes narrowed in challenge at that. "No." He replied, curtly.

"Good." She spun to face him, eyes alight with something like mischief. "Rock, paper, scissors for Nigiri? I get black if I win."

He'd never heard of something so ridiculous, but he did it anyway. It felt so surreal, standing here in the gloom with her, playing such a silly game. He couldn't believe this was happening. Like having a recurring dream turn into reality, it didn't quite feel like it was real.

"Black it is." She grinned victoriously, once her paper won over his rock. Her palm was surprisingly warm covering his fist, even though he was just holding it.

To Touya's lack of surprise, Shindou started with Shusaku's opening on the komoku rather than the star point. He was more than prepared for that, ready for the diagonal thereafter that had surprised him so much during their first game. He did not intend to give her even an inch this time-he had a feeling Shindou was the kind of player who could hold onto that inch until the very end.

While that might have been true, he had no evidence to support this, because by the time he recalculated in his head how the points were adding up, he appeared to be winning. From a more pedantic modern view she was giving too much away, but considering the era of her joseki her forcing move in the lower left made sense. She left the upper left wide open, and he didn't intend to let that go to waste.

Perhaps he shouldn't have been so surprised by the brutish force she displayed to turn the tables on him, in desperate contrast to the contemplative and unhurried play she had shown in their first game. Almost as if she had, once again, allowed him to take the lead. Except this time, she had every intention of wrenching it back from him, systematically clawing it away from him until she could pry it out of his cold, dead hands. It was enough to make a cold sweat break out on his neck, despite the weather.

He had capitalized on the weakness of her outdated joseki, but he wasn't sure if it would be enough.

Without a goban to focus on, he found himself once again unwillingly ensnared in her appearance. Despite the brutal game tumbling in his head, he found his thoughts insensibly lingering on the most absurd of things; the way her hair curled in the afternoon rain, the flutter of her wet lashes, her mouth and the flash of white as she bit at her bottom lip. He dismissed them in favor of his own thoughts, even as he continued to focus in on her intensely.

Hikaru may have suggested playing a game like this, but she hadn't exactly expected this outcome.

It was one thing to have that penetrating gaze and laser-focus fixated onto a goban, and a whole other thing to have it fixated on herself. If she was actually the one playing this game, she doubted she'd be able to concentrate at all. His icy blue eyes were enough to give her frostbite; so profoundly centered on her it almost felt as if his gaze was burning.

" *How's the game going, Sai?*" She asked hesitantly, as she spoke aloud another point on their imaginary board.

" *Well.*" He spread his fan over his face, eying Touya thoughtfully . "*I have a thick territory advantage along the lower edge, but his move in the upper left was a good shape. However, his last move may have left his center a bit too thin.*"

Even when she could see it she found it hard to conceptualize- Hikaru didn't even bother trying to imagine in when there wasn't even a board to see in the first place.

" *How good is he?*"

" *Very impressive.*" Sai replied immediately. " *Such overflowing talent, and it is so refined and concise. Without a shadow of a doubt he is a professional-it wouldn't surprise me at all if he was on the cusp of winning a title or two .*"

Incredibly flattering words, coming from the patron Go Saint of the world, and the ghost who bemoaned a great majority of the future joseki they had seen during Hikaru's crash course on the last one hundred years or so of Go history.

" *All the same,*" he continued, "*It won't be enough.*"

Hikaru pulled her gaze away from the temperamental weather, back to the boy seated across from her. He certainly looked conflicted. The intensity in his eyes had not dimmed in the slightest, but his mouth was pursed as if his thoughts were warring against each other.

Akira cursed under his breath, reorganizing his thoughts once again as he contemplated his next move. He had built up a moyo of great potential in the center-there was no reason for him to be so dissatisfied, regardless of the territory Shindou had built in the top left corner. But the moment he played an attachment at 5-2 he realized immediately how needless it was. It was too small-minded of him; he only had ko threats in the top-right hand corner, but black could easily sacrifice its position there. And he ended up leaving himself completely vulnerable on his left flank.

At this point, black would not be deterred. Whatever lead he had would disappear with his precarious position in the center.

It was almost bitterly ironic; he had put so much effort into thinking through this game, and yet it hadn't even lasted half as long as his first.

They exchanged more hands at the bottom right; Shindou continued onwards, heedless of his traps. Could she truly be out reading him to such an extent, or was he simply that transparent? A few more exchanges, and he managed to stop her advancement into the center; he responds with a hane to her last probing move, expecting her answer at 15-16. He also expected her next move after that, playing a connection that was too severe for her to leave unanswered. In the following fight she took two of his stones, but he

returned with taking five of hers; much to his frustration, sente returned to her though with her next move, forcing him to play in response to the danger of a cut.

By the time Akira came up for air and surveyed the board in full, he could see a few options unraveling before his eyes. None of them were as optimum as he would have liked, despite the steady defensive front he'd been working on. After a brief attack on black to settle the situation in the encroaching battle around the bottom edge, he managed to collect more points in the center, coming out of the battle with Shindou's shape still alive, but without much risk of intrusion.

To his calculations he may have won that fight, but the larger war was a different story.

He may have decent territory in the bottom right, but the vast majority of his potential territory was tied up in the center-and despite his best efforts, he didn't know if he would be able to secure it.

Akira's brow furrowed grimly. If he could read ahead enough to see the outcome, then so could Shindou. There was no point in drawing it out further.

"I resign."

He caught her gaze in the muted light, wondering what his own expression must look like. Her expression was difficult to read, soft but taciturn, studying him deeply. His must be even more confusing, because his own inner turmoil was so perplexing even he didn't know what to make of it.

On the one hand, he felt invigorated-there was a pleasantness floating in him that came from the simple joy of playing an especially challenging game. But there was a bitterness there too; this was a game he had no intention of losing. The two did not mix well together, and the end result was an emotion lost and forlorn.

"Thank you for the game." She demurred, holding his gaze.

But he had gotten his wish. He had played her once again, and Shindou did not disappoint. If anything, she had lived up to his expectations and then some.

In the face of his expression, Hikaru didn't know what to say.

" *Sai... what did you do to him?*"

The ghost said nothing for a long moment. " *I played him with the strength he deserves.*" He replied, then.

But what does that mean? Hikaru thought, concerned. He looked devastated, and yet still composed. Hikaru couldn't quite tell if he felt disheartened or galvanized; maybe a bit of both. He still hadn't said anything, and Hikaru found herself equally at a loss for words. She had only been speaking numbers for what could have been the past hour, and yet her voice felt hoarse and overused.

She shifted uncomfortably, tearing her gaze away.

The rain had evened out into a gloomy drizzle; traffic continued unheeded. From the bright, watery lights painted down the street she assumed it must have gotten pretty late. She was fairly sure a bus had come and gone at some point while they were playing, without either of them getting on, or even acknowledging it at all.

"It stopped raining." She found herself saying, for lack of anything else to say.

Touya looked up at that, his eyes finally leaving her, as if he was pulling himself out of his own head to remember the world outside of it.

Hikaru stood, stretching out her legs as she threw her arms over her head, a tentative hand moving to her hair. It probably looked like a

hot mess. She checked her phone, relieved to find there were no pressing messages.

"Where are you headed?" She asked, when it became clear he wasn't going to say anything.

"I-" He stopped. "Home, I suppose." He ended, complicated expression breaking into something sheepish.

Hikaru hummed. "By train?"

Touya nodded.

"We're going the same way, then." She smiled.

He followed her without a word as she turned around and walked out from underneath the shelter of the bus stop. It felt like a spell had been broken, crossing back out into the real world. People brushed past them as they walked side by side in silence.

"So... do you go to school around here?" Hikaru asked, feeling a bit lame with the attempt at conversation, but she'd noticed he was wearing a school uniform, and found herself curious.

The question went unanswered for long enough that she turned to look at him.

"Hm? Oh, sorry," he shook his head abruptly, as if clearing his thoughts. "I'm still... a bit stuck on our game. Yes, I go to school nearby."

"It's okay, me too." She assured him-at least, it seemed that she should be, from how unusually quiet Sai was being. "You're still in school, even if you're a professional go player?"

"I don't intend on continuing after graduation." He explained in answer.

"I see." Hikaru said. "So you're doing both, huh? It must be hard."

Touya looked down. "I suppose so." He replied, modestly.

An understatement, most likely. Her eyes trailed down the long stretches of window displays, the bright signs and lights sprinkling onto the wet ground like diamonds. She knew how difficult it could be to pursue a career while still in school. Her life as a trainee was a never ending cycle of exhaustion and lassitude; always one step from burning out, nothing but determination and drive keeping her moving. The life of an idol wasn't any less exhausting-the fatigue could be crippling at times, but it felt like it was worth it, to do what she wanted to do. Hikaru was sure Touya felt the same-like all the unending hours and hard work were all worth it in the end.

Hikaru tore her eyes away, returning her attention to her companion. "So what do you do, exactly?" She found herself asking, curiously. Sai did not have much to illuminate on the subject, seeing as though his experience was woefully outdated. Hikaru doubted they were still playing castle games, after all. "As a professional go player, I mean."

"I play games with other professionals, compete in tournaments to win titles; I also teach, and commentate on other's games sometimes."

"Titles?" Hikaru repeated, making a face. "Oh! Like Honinbo?"

"Yes, like Honinbo." Touya agreed, thoughtfully. "Your favorite player, Shusaku, held that title once."

"Huh? Favorite?"

Touya looked taken by surprise by her confusion. "Well it's just-you favor his opening, and his diagonal." He explained hastily.

"Oh." She smiled abashedly. "That, yeah."

"Do you not... know what titles are?" He asked, uncertainly.

"Um, well, I know who Shusaku is."

Touya stared at her blankly. How could someone so amazing not know something so basic? It was as if she knew absolutely nothing about Go at all-which was absurd, considering her skill level.

Their last fight before his resignation was still fresh in his mind. Her complex style spoke of antiquity, and yet it was surprisingly refreshing. The game still swirled in his head, as if waiting to burst at the seams. What did it matter, in the grand scheme of things, if she didn't know much about the professional scene? Her Go was more than enough. All of a sudden he was itching to write it down, to see it on a real board, not just as floating clusters and sequences in his head.

He turned to her, wanting to ask her a thousand questions all at once. But what came out was, "Are you busy right now?"

"Right now?" Shindou blinked. "Not really; I was just gonna get some food and take a shower."

"The Go Salon is closed today for renovations, but my parents are out of town. There's food on the way there."

She was looking at him blankly.

"I'd like to... discuss the game with you." He ended, hoping he wasn't coming off too strong, but wanting her to agree all the same.

She appeared to be pondering this, gaze tilted up into the overcast sky. The night was stormy and purple, an impenetrable mask that made time seem meaningless.

"Sure." She said, to his great relief. "It's not far, is it?"

He shook his head. "Not at all."

It didn't occur to him until after they'd gotten off the train, picked up food, and headed to his house that he'd never had friends over.

People came to his house all the time, for study sessions and teaching games and whatnot, so it wasn't as if he wasn't used to entertaining. He wasn't sure if Shindou could really be called a 'friend'-and she was coming to discuss a game, so maybe she wasn't all that different than anyone else who came over. But they were alone here, with his parents gone for the evening in another prefecture for one of his father's matches, just the two of them.

"It's very pretty," Hikaru noted, eyes big and bright as she studied the solemn gardens.

"Thank you," he replied, awkwardly, distracting himself with fishing for his keys. It wasn't as if he had anything to do with the landscaping. Or the house, really.

He led her to his room, so they could play Go and eat at the same time. Otherwise they would have to eat in the kitchen or living room, as they couldn't eat in the study. Shindou didn't seem bothered by this at all, even as Akira spared a wary glance around his room, picking up all the little blemishes; a dress shirt thrown over his desk chair, shoes by the door, kifu strewn messily over his desk. She spared a cursory glance around the room, before plopping in front of the goban, making grabby hands for the bag of takeout.

She made a noise of happiness as she unearthed her dumplings. She bit into the dough with one hand, wielding a go stone in the other. "Hmm," she mumbled around her mouthful. "Where did I start again?"

Shindou hummed, before placing her stone at 3-4. "Ah. That's right."

Akira folded himself across from her, dipping into the white goke to retrieve a stone of his own.

They recreated their game together as they ate, Shindou far more enthusiastic about that than he was. He eventually fished out his own bowl of noodles, peppering the silence with occasional questions, more interested in the game than the food. Why did she

defend here, instead of there? Why the atekomi instead of the obvious atari? His questions came faster as they launched past the beginning of the game, when the pace of the game switched hands.

The feeling of seeing a game living inside of his head spiral out onto the goban was beyond words. Somehow, in the abstract the intangibility of it had left him without as much appreciation as the game rightfully deserved. He may have resigned, but he could be proud of this game. Despite the handicap of playing without a board, they both played incredibly.

"I shouldn't have used the keima here," he murmured, placing the stone down. It was a costly rookie mistake.

"Why do you say that?"

He looked up at that, suddenly realizing that Shindou was no longer seated across from him. She had sprawled out more comfortably a while ago, but now she was slumped on the ground, head pillowed in her arms.

"Shindou..."

"I'm fine." She said, smiling with her eyes closed.

His brow furrowed. "But, you-

"I can play just fine from here, promise." She assured him good-naturedly. She paused for a moment. "I don't think it was a bad move at all. Maybe the one-point jump is considered more offensive but that would have left you open for the cut-through on the left."

He stared down at the board, dumbfounded. Maybe she didn't need to see it after all. Then again, she did beat him soundly without even needing a board.

"I see." He said, thoughtfully. She had a point. "What would you have done in my place?"

Her eyes fluttered a bit, but stayed closed. "I don't think I would have approached the shape like that at all. Not that yours was bad-I just don't think I would."

"What would you do, then?"

She yawned. "Do you mean, how would I have defended that territory in the first place? To start I wouldn't have responded to black's pincer. I would have..." She yawned again. "Played a tenuki, drawn black's attention elsewhere."

"A tenuki?" He repeated, gaze drifting back down to the board. Interesting. It wasn't in his instincts to let a battle slide like that, but at this point in the game it might have been a better play.

And if that was the case... yes, if he had taken the blow there-a smaller one, perhaps one or two points-he could have secured his position across the board with a thicker shape, which would have greatly helped him later. And at that point, he could have kept his superior shape in the center and returned to attack this area, changing sente back into his hands, forcing Shindou to defend. It was a plan quite unlike him, but one that would have worked very effectively.

"Yes, I see..." he murmured, continuing the train of thought. "A shape like that would have put me in better form for the later battle in the center."

He set more stones down, the clack of the pieces against the board the only sound aside from Shindou's rhythmic breathing.

"But it's a bit riskier than I would like..." He added. "It leaves a dangerous gap that could be exploited."

And then, as an afterthought. "I suppose it would just be a risk you'd have to be confident taking." And Akira had a feeling Shindou had more than enough confidence in her abilities to do so.

Akira hummed thoughtfully. "What if instead of either, white had played an extension?"

When she didn't answer, he looked up.

"Shindou?"

This time, Shindou was fast asleep. Maybe she didn't have any trouble keeping up with the game and his thoughts even without her sight, but it looked like she'd fought a losing battle with sleep.

He sighed, smiling over her with an emotion that felt oddly like fondness. It was strange to think he'd been thinking on her nonstop for days and now she was right in front of him. She had a way of casually blowing all his expectations, he was noticing.

"Shindou, you can't sleep there." He told her gently. When she only made a sleepy noise of commiseration, he wondered what he ought to do.

Well, obviously he couldn't just leave her there. Should he call her a cab? But that almost seemed rude-he didn't want her to think he was kicking her out or anything. Maybe it might be easiest just to let her sleep here. But what should he do? Move her to the guest bedroom? Would she even wake up?

He found himself staring down at her sleeping form, wondering all sorts of ridiculous things about her.

Finally Akira shook his head, climbing to his feet. Perhaps it would be best just to grab the spare futon and roll it out next to her. He might not have much luck getting her to move rooms, but getting her to roll over onto it had merit.

She was awake before him.

There was a respectable amount of space between their futons, and it wasn't as if anything untowardly had happened, but all the same he woke up feeling vaguely embarrassed.

"Hey," Shindou looked over to him, when she noticed he was awake. She put her phone down from where she had been sitting up scrutinizing it closely. "Sorry I crashed here." She apologized, grinning sheepishly.

"Oh, it was no problem." He assured her, getting up. He couldn't believe he'd slept so soundly with someone he didn't know right beside him. For all he knew, she could be a secret serial killer. That sounded rather implausible, but the fact remained she was pretty much a total stranger.

Shindou pulled a face, looking down at herself. Even thinking of touching her while she was asleep, let alone taking off her jacket or changing her into more comfortable clothes had made him flushed in the face, so she was still in yesterday's attire. At the very least, it appeared to be dry now. "Wow, I'm gross." She commented with a laugh.

"You can use the shower, if you like." He offered.

"Is that alright?"

"Sure-I'm sure I could find... something for you to change into." Although he had no idea how he would manage that.

This was how the morning found them in his kitchen, Shindou lounging in a chair at the table while Akira reheated leftovers from last night, dressed in her leggings from last night and one of his shirts, braiding her wet hair. The both of them were quiet aside from occasional questions rehashing some of her moves from their game. He had thought that playing her one more time would be enough; just one game, a redemption of sorts. But now all he could think of was another one. And then another after that, and another. He felt he

hadn't even explored the shallows of her mind, wondering just how deep it went.

The microwave dinged, and he moved to open it as he set aside both their tea. Shindou had expressed a distaste in coffee-she said she only ever used it in dire circumstances, much to his amusement-but had no opinion on tea flavors, so he'd used whatever his mother kept around. She was humming something under her breath, checking her phone.

Whatever it was, it occupied her attention conclusively, her fingers darting over the screen.

It occurred to him then that she might have had plans for last night that he had total derailed. He certainly didn't regret it, but he did feel somewhat abashed.

"Are you... late for something again?" He hazarded, remembering how they had gotten cut off last time. "I'm sorry. I should have checked if it was alright with you before I offered-

"It's fine." She cut him off with a smile. "Thanks." She grabbed her cup from his waiting hands.

It was a quiet breakfast, but not uncomfortably so. There was something effortless and easy about Shindou's presence; a benign collectivity that came from an internal confidence. When people were uncomfortable with themselves it always tended to manifest in some subtle, unconscious way-at least to Akira, who was an expert at reading other people. He always managed to inadvertently pick up on that sort of thing; during games he utilized it to his advantage, but outside of matches it always made him feel unsettled. But Shindou's aura felt calm and impenetrable.

She asked him about his professional matches, exhibiting a deep fascination with professional go. It was disheartening, actually, knowing she was so interested, even if she had no intentions of becoming a professional herself. All the same he didn't mind

discussing it. It was interesting, actually, conversing about his games and tournaments and having to explain things he normally wouldn't need to with his other peers.

"So are you in a tournament right now?" She asked curiously, swiping the last of the shrimp dumplings as she did so.

He put his tea down. "I was in the main Honinbo tournament," he answered, surprised by the lack of bitterness in his voice. His loss to Ogata had been a point of contention for a while now. "But I have the final round of the preliminaries for the Kisei league, and after, I start the preliminaries for the Meijin."

"Sounds busy." Shindou remarked, raising her brows. "But exciting."

Akira smiled a bit at that. "It should be, once it proceeds into further rounds."

"Not challenging enough for you yet?" She grinned cheekily.

"Finding challenging players is difficult." He looked at her deeply at that. "Difficult, but worth it."

She must have realized he was referring to her, looking away. Akira was a bit surprised to see a blush creeping onto her face; he hadn't done it intentionally, he was just being honest.

When he opened his mouth again, he'd made up his mind. He was being honest, she was a worthy player, and he would do whatever he could to keep her. This wasn't the sort of talent he could simply walk away from without trying his hardest to keep.

A noise interrupted him, startling them both.

For a moment he didn't recognize what it was. Then he identified the rattling noise as the key to the front door-eyes widening.

His parents were home.

Early.

Shindou looked just as caught off guard, eyes as big as his. They both froze. There was no amount of quick thinking that could save him; his mother was calling his name, voice traveling closer. It didn't take her long to find him.

He met her gaze on accident, as she appeared in the doorway, followed quickly by his father. She looked about as surprised as he felt at the scene that greeted her.

Shindou, at least, did not seem shell-shocked into immobility. She leapt to her feet, turning around to face his parents.

"H-Hello," Hikaru stuttered, looking about as mortified as Akira felt.

Akira had never seen his mother look so shocked before. He wanted to bang his head on the table and die of mortification. "Hello," Akiko recovered herself well. "I don't believe we've met before. I'm Akiko, Akira's mother."

"Shindou Hikaru," she bowed hastily. "Sorry to intrude, um, we were staying up late recreating a game and I accidentally fell asleep..." She tugged nervously at the bottom of her shirt-his shirt, he noted with mortification.

"Oh, it's no trouble at all. I hope Akira was a good host." His mother replied, smiling.

"Yes, absolutely. It was very kind of him to let me stay over." She laughed lightly. "But on that note, I really ought to get going..."

"Are you sure? You're welcome to stay for longer, it looks like you two were in the middle of breakfast."

"Oh, thank you for the offer, but we've about finished up." She smiled. "It was great to meet you both."

He wasn't sure if it was possible for this situation to get any more painful. His mother looked befuddled and confused, his father stoically silent. She bowed to both of them again before rushing through her goodbyes and making a mad dash for the front door- Akira didn't blame her, he wanted to do the same.

In the ensuing silence, Akira took a resigned breath.

"Akira," his mother turned to him, with a light scolding tone. "You could have at least mentioned you were having a friend over."

"I'm very sorry mother," he apologized profusely. "I'm afraid I hadn't intended on it. We had played a game without a board earlier in the day, and I wanted to recreate it and record it. At that point it was already so late; it seemed rather impolite to make her leave."

It was testimony to Akira's profound maturity that both his parents took this explanation at face value. Not that any of it was a lie, but even to his ears it sounded unrealistically convenient.

"Oh, she's a go player?" With that out of the way, his mother's expression had done a total one-eighty. She looked rather ecstatic. "How wonderful! Does she go to your school?"

"No, she doesn't." Now that he thought about it, Akira had no idea where she went to school.

Akiko tilted her head. "Where did you two meet?"

"At the go salon," he answered promptly. "She came in and asked for a game. But she had to leave before I could ask for another. Fortunately we ran into each other yesterday."

"I see." She said, eyes twinkling. "Well, she seemed like a very nice girl. I hope you invite her over again."

"Yes..." He trailed off, wondering if his face was really doing this admirable of a job imitating a tomato or if it was just in his head.

" *Well, that was interesting.*" Hikaru laughed as she wandered to the main road, hailing a taxi.

" *Was it really okay to just leave like that?*" Sai wondered aloud, worried.

" *Better that than the alternative.*" Hikaru laughed some more, shaking her head.

It was probably for the best that his parents had come home when they did-she had been at a loss as to how to politely take her leave. More than that though, she had actually felt reluctance at the thought. She liked Touya; he was such a gentleman, and certainly a sight for the sore eyes. If he hadn't told her he was a professional go player, she wouldn't have been surprised to hear he was an idol too. Hikaru sighed. Man, not even plastic surgery could get you features like that.

And anyway, Hikaru wasn't exactly up to playing nice with the parents right now. She didn't have much time left on her vacation, and no time at all for relaxing.

She planned out the rest of her day in her head-first off, she had to go back to her hotel and change. Alternatively she could hit the gym or the studio for a bit, since her workout yesterday had been waylaid by the weather. She had a call with management in the early afternoon, and an interview with a magazine editor to prep for. For some reason, Hikaru didn't really feel like doing any of that right now.

"Excuse me," she leaned over the front seat. "Would it be alright if I changed the destination?"

"Sure," the cab driver replied. "Where to?"

" *Hey Sai, what do you think of another game?*"

The ghost gasped in delight. " *Really?*"

" *Yeah-why not?*"

Hikaru focused back on the driver. "Know of any Go salons around here?"

sometimes (가끔) - chapter of 15&

I did some light editing of this series for better continuity, mainly just from a formatting standpoint. The chapters are divided into tracks, numbering 1, 2, 3 etc. And the chapters are different songs that altogether create what is (spoiler) going to be Cy's solo album. The tracks are just sort of songs that go with the scenes, and the chapters are supposed to be songs that Hikaru actually sings. I imagine her voice to be a cross between Heize, Taeyeon and Hoody haha

Chapter 2: sometimes (가끔) - chapter of 15&

Track 3:

dayfly

DEAN

Once again, it was only in hindsight that Akira realized he had no way of contacting Shindou Hikaru.

And worse, he really shouldn't be exerting so much energy stressing about this; not when he had a big game coming up. He had the Kisei tournament to get into, and he should be spending every opportunity he had studying up on his opponents and perfecting his strategies. After that was of course the Hokuto cup, which everyone was making a big deal of, in the most polarizing way possible. Nothing stirred up patriotism like a tournament against other countries, but aside from Akira Japan didn't have much in the way of competition. That wasn't to say he thought his peers were severely lacking in talent, but aside from him none of them had yet to play in any serious, high level tournaments. That sort of environment was vastly underestimated; the pressure was overwhelming, enough to throw

anyone who wasn't used to it off their normal game. And the only way to overcome this handicap was through experience-experience that Team Japan would lack.

It hadn't been long at all since he'd seen Shindou Hikaru, yet it felt like ages. Probably because he didn't know when he'd ever get the opportunity to play her again.

And then it all came flooding back to him; the rain, the bus stop, the unfocused morning sunlight and Shindou Hikaru, fast asleep beside him.

Lucky for him, it appeared that once again he'd find her through no attempts of his own.

Shindou Hikaru darted out of a tall Tokyo skyscraper, weaving through foot traffic as fast as she could in these heels, a very scandalized ghost floating after her.

Sai had been at first fascinated, then confused, and finally deeply disturbed by the whole spectacle that was a magazine photoshoot. He was mesmerized by the cameras, the fans, the lights-everything else was simply bizarre to him. And he was no great fan of the camera man.

" *The things he was saying to you!*" He tutted, opening his fan over his face, as if to hide his scowl.

Hikaru shrugged. " *They're like that sometimes.*" She said. " *Most of the time they're very nice.*"

This one, however, was nothing but impatient and downright rude. He kept telling Hikaru to do one thing in one moment, and despairing over it in the next. Every pose was too posed, or too relaxed. Apparently Hikaru was woefully unphotogenic. He shouted at the makeup artists, was annoyed by the catering, and raged at the wardrobe. By the end of it, everyone down from the intern to the editor was ready to call it quits.

" *Photoshoots aren't normally so bad.*" Hikaru assured him, half-heartedly. Although it was starting to become less unusual. It seemed to get progressively worse the more famous she became; she couldn't imagine how much worse it would get, after this second tour.

" *Are they normally that long?*"

" *No.*" This one just happened to drag out forever.

Hikaru checked her watch again. Far too long, actually. At this rate, the Go Salon would be closed by the time she got there.

The blonde sped through the crowds, looking into her bag to check and make sure the shirt was still there. She'd gotten it dry-cleaned with the rest of her laundry, and had been meaning to return it a few days ago. Unfortunately life-and her schedule-had a way of getting in the way.

At this rate she'd never make it if she tried to take the train. Instead she ducked through the pedestrians, weaving her way through the heavy after-hours crowd until she was spat back out near the road, waving down a cab.

Hikaru sighed in relief as she practically sprawled into the back seat of the cab, diving in there to make it into her seat before the light changed again. She may have lived in cities all her life, but sometimes it was overwhelmingly fast paced even for her. By her side, Sai looked like he'd been scarred for life. For a ghost from a thousand-years ago, he was adjusting pretty well though. Hikaru really had to hand it to him; he'd taken a front seat in the fast lane and had run with it. And there was really no other way to explain away Hikaru's life aside from that-it was a chaotic fire drill at all hours of the day.

" *I thought you were on vacation,*" Sai exclaimed, plastered to the side of the cab with a dazed expression. " *And you explained*

vacations as times of relaxation-Hikaru, I hate to say it, but none of this seems particularly relaxing to me."

Hikaru laughed, perhaps a bit bitterly. " *Oh, Sai,"* she chuckled under her breath. " *For me, there's really no such thing anymore."*

Sai spared her a solemn glance. " *And you're okay with this? Always?"*

" *I chose this life."* She said, with conviction. " *I spent years as a trainee just wishing for this... I'll admit the reality is lackluster in comparison, but-this was, is, my dream. I love what I do."*

Sai could see that very well, but he could also see just how exhausting it must be as well. Hikaru and Torajiro were alike in that regard; they seemed to share a fervent love and vehement loathing for their passion, in equal parts. Torajiro had loved Go with his very soul, but before long it had become so taxing for him. All the games, and the traveling, and the legacy which was thrust upon him. Hikaru seemed to be facing the same issue, running at the speed of light towards an inevitability that Sai could only hope she'd find a way to avoid. He didn't want to have to watch someone he'd come to care for go through something like that again. Just the thought made him shiver.

" *I understand ."* He sighed, heavily. " *Just-please, take care of yourself."*

Hikaru beamed at him. " *I'll be fine, I'm young!"* She waved him off.

Torajiro had been young, too.

Although the 'cars' around them seemed to be moving at the pace of leisurely grazing deer, they eventually managed to arrive at their destination. Hikaru assured him that this was the fastest mode of transportation, but from what Sai had seen of it, it was hardly any better than walking. Hikaru claimed that out in the less crowded areas these 'cars' could go faster than any human or animal, for

incredible distances. Sai would just have to see it for himself to believe it, he supposed. The future had lived up to its promises thus far though, so he didn't doubt it.

Hikaru paid the cab driver, tossing around that dangerous smile of hers until whatever grumbling he had from ending up so far off his route was long gone. Sai shook his head. That certainly hadn't changed in all the years he'd haunted this earth; a well-timed smile from a beautiful girl could flip the world on its head.

Hikaru dashed into the Go salon, as fast as she could in those absurd shoes of hers.

Ah, and this was another thing that hadn't changed- the look on that boy's face when he saw her.

Sai opened his fan, hiding his smile behind it.

"S-Shindou!" Touya blinked in surprise, rising out of his chair and walking around the table he had been seated at.

"Touya-kun," she smiled in relief, bypassing the front counter.

There was a moment where they both just stared at each other, as if unsure of what to do. Finally Hikaru took a slight step back, until there was a respectable amount of distance between them again. She looked away quickly, hiding her face as she searched through her bag with a flustered hand.

"I, um, I have your shirt," she explained hastily. "I'm so sorry, I meant to return it earlier but I wanted to get it cleaned first."

Not entirely a lie, but Sai noticed Hikaru had tactfully left out the fact that she had worn the shirt the whole day and had not changed out of it until long after she'd returned to her hotel.

"Oh," Touya blinked. "That's-thank you. Sorry you had to go through all that trouble."

He took the offered garment awkwardly, the both of them looking equally at a loss for words. Sai could have cringed at the moment, wishing he could just push the two of them together already. Or intervene, somehow.

"Did you have time for a game?" Touya asked after a beat, perhaps a bit eagerly. Sai didn't blame him; he'd been itching for another game with the boy himself. Hikaru had made good on her word and toured around the city with him, ducking into Go salons to play matches for him-but none had been as exhilarating as his game with the professional.

Hikaru frowned, looking regretful. "I've got an event to go to, unfortunately."

Touya's expression flickered into something equally as regretful. "Some other time then." He said, deflating.

Hikaru shifted her weight nervously, brushing a stray lock of hair out of her face as she did so. "I probably won't be done until late..."

His eyes snapped back to her.

She bit her lip. "And I don't have a *goban* either..." Hikaru shrugged. "But you could come over after, though. If you want..."

Touya looked hesitant, but hopeful. "Are you sure it won't be much trouble for you? I can bring a portable one." It was rare of him to offer, but he wasn't as much of a stickler as some of the other professionals-the newer, more portable go boards never bothered him, even if he did find magnetic stones to be trying.

Hikaru smiled. "No problem at all." She insisted, before digging back into her bag. "What's your number? I'll text you the address and what time I should be done at."

Hikaru had never gotten a boy's number through Go, but she supposed there was a first for everything. She normally didn't care

much for boys, either. Just another side effect of spending most of puberty training for long hours with little time for social interactions. All the other trainees were around her age, and they were all exceedingly attractive, but they had never quite felt like real people. She'd made friends with some of them, but altogether they were just other faceless people chasing the same dream as her, bodies next to her moving in stride.

The blonde popstar left fairly quickly after that, only sparing enough time for a polite but hasty farewell, and then she was near sprinting out the door again. Sai trailed after her dutifully, tagging along as they whizzed by a city that Hikaru never seemed to get to see. They would pass by brightly lit corners and long straits of glowing signs with the occasional comment by Hikaru; anecdotes on places she used to know, places she wanted to see. But Sai had a feeling there would never come a day where Hikaru could stop this car, open this door, and step into one of them. At least, not at the current rate of her life.

Shindou had said to meet him in the lobby at nine; it was now nine fifteen, and Akira wasn't sure if he should be concerned yet or not.

When she had given him an address, he hadn't known what to expect. A modest house in the Tokyo suburbs, really, perhaps parents. But when he'd exited the train at the nearest stop, he found his directions taking him deeper and deeper into the heart of the city, until he found himself standing in front of a grand skyscraper. A hotel, he realized. She was staying at a hotel.

His first thought was one of belated surprise. However, after making himself comfortable in the lobby, it occurred to him just what this meant. Shindou Hikaru was staying in a hotel; Shindou Hikaru was from out of town. He paled. Just how far was she? Kansai? Farther? He had no way of knowing. It brought forth quite a few questions, why was she here? What was she doing, wasn't she in school right now? All this just brought home the realization that he still knew nothing about her.

Twenty minutes past the time she had asked him to meet, the doorman pulled open the door to reveal a slightly wet Shindou Hikaru.

The very first thing he did was stare.

She thanked the man politely, adjusting a large bouquet of flowers to take a bag he'd been holding for her. She brushed a long curl of hair away from her eyes in an oddly mesmerizing gesture, smiling before walking into the extravagant lobby, the movement of her dress equally as mesmerizing.

Akira brought his eyes away, reminding himself it was rude to stare, even if everyone else in the lobby was doing the same thing. He could hear the click of her heels as she picked her way across the lobby, his gaze fixed determinably at the magazine in his lap.

"Sorry I'm late," she greeted apologetically, tilting her head a bit to loosen a few strands of hair tangled in the flowers.

"It's no problem." He assured her, standing up and reaching over to help her untangle her hair. It was surprisingly soft, considering how elaborately styled it was. He ended up wrenching his hand away rather abruptly when he realized he'd been holding it between his fingers for an impolite amount of time.

"I hope you weren't waiting long," she added with a sheepish smile. "My... event went a little longer than I thought it would."

"Not at all." Well actually it had been more like thirty minutes, since he had wanted to be early and then ended up waiting an extra twenty, but for some reason that slipped his mind right now.

"My room is..." She stopped, her eyes darting between the many hallways that led to different elevator shafts. "That way, I'm pretty sure." She ended with a laugh, taking off in that direction.

"So how do you like the hotel?" He found himself asking, once they were in the elevator.

"It's very nice," she replied, not looking nearly as uncomfortable with small talk as he was. Hikaru pressed the button for the eighteenth floor. "I've never stayed here before, actually."

"Do you come to the city often?" He asked, coolly, keeping his tone light and conversational.

"No, unfortunately. I miss it a lot."

He swallowed thickly. So she definitely wasn't local. "Where are you from?"

"Oh, I'm from Tokyo." She answered with a smile. The elevator lurched; a middle aged shuffled inside. "But I moved a couple years back."

"Where do you live now?"

"I live in Seoul."

Korea? He almost choked. Definitely farther than he had thought. His stomach sank. "I see. How long are you in town for?"

"I'm not too sure, actually." The elevator lurched again a few floors before Hikaru's. The couple exited. "I was only supposed to be here for two weeks, but some things have come up."

"How long have you been here so far?"

Hikaru made a thoughtful noise. "About a week?" She hazarded.

The doors slid open to reveal a small sitting room, and a web of hallways spreading out in all directions. Hikaru led them down one of the halls, before coming to a stop in front of a nondescript door. The keycard beeped approvingly, and then she was opening it. "Sorry

about the mess," she said with a self-deprecating laugh. "I haven't really had time to clean."

Akira had never been in a girl's room before, so he had nothing to compare it to, but he didn't think it was that bad. It wasn't as clean as his own room, but it was clear to see Shindou wasn't exaggerating when she said she was short on time. From the brief look he'd had into her life, she always appeared to be in a rush to get somewhere. The bed was made, but there was a pile of blouses and dresses still on hangars tossed onto the duvet; on the opposite wall the Tokyo skyline glittered at him from behind the long stretch of windows, and beneath that was a small, empty coffee table with two wingback chairs. One of the chairs had nothing on it, but the other had at least four pairs of pants slung over the back. The bathroom door was open to reveal a truly boggling amount of makeup. There was a still mostly packed suitcase open by the chest of drawers; most of the garments were folded but quite a few were spilling out. This was to say nothing of all the shoes scattered about.

Hikaru laughed as she picked her way through the mess, depositing the flowers in an empty vase, and setting the shopping bag in her other arm down by one of the wingback chairs. She had chosen the messier one, gesturing to the other for him.

He tried not to look too curious, even as he took stock of his surroundings with fascination. Considering how much personal stuff was scattered about, it was still as impersonal as any hotel room.

He brought out his portable go board from his own bag, setting it on the table between them.

Hikaru was not paying him any attention, shucking off her shoes with a sigh of relief. "I've been waiting for this all day."

"Me too." He said, even though he wasn't sure if she was referring to the game or her lack of shoes.

Hikaru just grinned at him, neither confirming nor denying what she meant. "Nigiri?" She offered, reaching into the little compartment of stones to grab a handful.

He nodded readily.

He could get used to this, he thought. He didn't think he'd been so soundly defeated by someone his age in his life. Oddly enough, this didn't deter him at all. Actually, he was smiling.

By the time Akira looked at the time, a few hours had already gone by, and it was late again. He knew he should probably be excusing himself, if he wanted to catch the last train home and get to bed by a reasonable hour, but right now that was the absolute last thing he wanted to do. He wanted to pry apart this game, in the same way he wanted to pry apart Shindou Hikaru.

"You want to go over the game?" She repeated, a complicated expression on her face.

He caught it before she could clear it away, frowning slightly. "Yes, but I understand if it's getting too late..."

To his relief, Hikaru shook his head. "No, that's alright. I just haven't eaten since lunch." She revealed sheepishly.

"Oh." His eyes widened. "Well shall we get dinner first?"

Hikaru nodded readily. "I think room service might be over already," she murmured, looking at the time on her phone. "But everywhere closes pretty late around here; I'm sure we could find somewhere to grab something."

Hikaru had not been lying. They left the game as it was and spilled out into the streets below, keeping their eyes pruned for restaurants. In this part of town everything was still lit up like Christmas, a decent amount of foot traffic still wandering around. He and Hikaru slipped

through the crowds, tossing out suggestions as they walked by them. Hikaru said she wanted something healthy-apparently that meant no noodles, fried food, or bread. This ended up meaning some foreign chain Akira had never heard of before, with food all in English. Hikaru had no trouble waltzing up to the counter and saying all the names without a hitch, and before long they were sitting in a booth by the windows waiting for one of the sleepy staff members to bring their food.

It occurred to Akira he'd never done this before, either. The booths around them were mostly empty, aside from other kids their age. Some were coming from a movie, others seemed to be out about at such a late hour for other reasons. Despite the heels and expensive looking outfit, Hikaru fit right in with the crowd; academically anyway, in reality Hikaru seemed to stand out no matter where they went or what she was doing. In the way that made people stop and stare, turning their heads, peering over the side of their booths. Either she was oblivious to this, or she just ignored it very well, because she never paid it much attention.

By the time their food came they were already talking about Go again, and for the first time in his life Akira wanted to change the conversation.

He was so happy to have someone his age and someone his level to discuss the game with, but there were all sorts of other questions he wanted to ask her. The kinds of questions that, well, that he supposed you would ask your friends. But Akira had never really had any of those, so he had no idea how to broach the subject, let alone ask them at all.

Fortunately for him, that was the thing about friends; you didn't always have to start the conversation on your own.

"So how do you like school?" Despite the fuss she had kicked up about the quality of food, and the salad she had ordered, Hikaru was still slurping down a milkshake. Akira tactfully made no comment about that one.

"It's alright." He may have wanted to change the conversation from Go, but he wasn't sure if he would have picked this.

Hikaru frowned slightly. "You don't like it?"

"It's not that," he hedged evasively, distracting himself with his food. "I just... don't really have much in common with my classmates." He ended up saying, finding it impossible to meet her gaze. He'd never said as much to anyone, although he was sure most people were observant enough to recognize this.

Akira had never had much in common with his peers, though, so this was no surprise.

However, Hikaru was sympathetic, but not pitying. "Me too." She said, so casually. "I have a pretty hard time getting along with people my age."

"Really?" He didn't mean to be rude, but he found that very hard to believe.

"I don't really go to school." She revealed. "I don't play any sports, and while I know of a lot of movies and TV shows and stuff I normally don't have time to watch any."

Akira blinked. "Oh."

"Plus, I'm always so busy it's hard to find time to hang out with people." She added with a sheepish smile.

"So you don't go to school in Korea?" He asked, curious. It was true high school was not mandatory in Japan, but he didn't know about Korea.

"It's complicated." Hikaru laughed. "I do, sometimes, but I also work a lot so I miss classes all the time. But I guess you know what I mean, huh?"

He smiled slightly. "Yes. I'm constantly missing classes."

"But you don't have to go to high school in Japan, right?" Hikaru prodded. "So why did you decide to continue?"

He wasn't entirely sure how to phrase his answer in a way that didn't seem so sad or inconsequential. He'd wanted to stay in school because it was really the last thing that made him feel his age. Sure, there were other pros that were around his age that had dropped out of high school, but they all had their own friends, and were all around the same age and rank; they still did things that kids their age did, and still hung out together regardless of school. If Akira stopped going to school, it was likely he would never see another kid his age for a while, especially now that Otea matches were going to be stopped. He was almost exclusively playing higher-dans these days; everyone in both the go salon and his study group had at least a decade or more on him; most of his clients for teaching games or even at events did too.

And while there were other pros that were his age, they were all of lower rank than him, and he could understand why they had a hard time befriending him. To them, he was an adversary, a goal, someone to strive to beat and to measure themselves against. It was hard enough to have that distinction for someone of the same age, let alone a friend.

But these were not the sort of issues he brought up, ever. All the same, he'd never really had anyone to voice them to, did he?

In the end, he couldn't quite manage to say any of that aloud. "It would feel weird not going."

"Especially when everyone else our age is in school." Hikaru agreed without missing a beat. "It would get kind of lonely."

"Yeah..." Akira swallowed thickly. "Exactly."

When he looked up, Hikaru was smiling at him, but it was difficult to understand. It felt very peculiar to be the recipient of that smile; he felt both warm and uncomfortable at the same time. He let out a

breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding when she looked away as she gave a long stretch.

"Well anyway, we've got a Go game to pick apart, don't we?" She remarked with a grin. "We should probably get going before they kick us out."

Akira didn't know what time it was, but the streets seemed significantly less crowded than before. The walk felt a lot shorter returning than it had when they embarked, if only because they weren't constantly tossing out and rejecting suggestions for food as they aimlessly walked about. The grand lobby seemed less pretentious when devoid of people, the elevator ride far longer without conversation or other hotel patrons to intersperse it. None of this deterred his excitement to return to their game, now that it was at the forefront of his mind again.

Hikaru immediately kicked her shoes off again, sprawling out in her chair. She grinned at him. "Ready?"

He smiled back. "More than."

Akira hadn't intended to stare, but he was anyway.

He also hadn't intended to stay the night again. Or miss the last train. Or sleep in the same bed as her. He hadn't intended to do a lot of things, but they had happened anyway, so it seemed a bit silly to fret over them now.

They hadn't closed the blinds last night, so the glimmering Tokyo nightscape had given way to a glorious Tokyo sunrise. The light sparkled against Hikaru's skin, warm and affectionate. She hadn't changed out of her dress, even though there were plenty of options to choose from all over the room; there were still pins in her blonde curls, loosened into an artful mess by sleep. He'd woken up before her this time, even though he wished he hadn't. Should he just let

her sleep? But what should he do, then? He couldn't just stare at her forever.

At the very least he could make himself useful. With one last look to the sleeping girl beside him, he pushed off the bed, slipping on his shoes. He had enough foresight to grab one of the spare room keys on his way out, retracing his steps to the elevator.

Hikaru was still fast asleep when he returned with breakfast, looking as if she hadn't moved even an inch. Dead asleep, then. He wondered when the last time she had slept this long was.

"Shindou?" He called, hesitantly.

Hikaru made a sleepy noise of discontent, rolling over. He closed his eyes, really, really wishing that skirt was a bit longer.

"Shindou," he said again.

Finally she cracked an eye open, flinging an arm over her face. "Ugh," she groaned, sounding like the last thing she wanted to do was be roused from sleep.

"I brought food and coffee," he said, feebly. "I wasn't sure if this constituted as dire circumstances, but..."

This at least brought forth a smile. She pushed her hair out of her eyes, arm sliding upwards to reveal a soft and sleepy gaze. "Coffee is perfect." She replied, before pushing herself up and sliding her legs off the bed.

He immediately held out a cup for her, and she took it with a noise of approval. She sniffed it with her eyes closed. "*Au bon pain ?*" She said, in a perfect French accent.

"Yeah-it was the closest." He hadn't actually known what it was, but he assumed she knew what she was talking about. And from her reaction he assumed he had chosen well.

"They're pretty good, as far as fake foreign French brands go," she remarked offhandedly. "I prefer it over *Pret a Manger* ." Her eyes snapped open, zeroing in on the bag. "You got pastries?"

Apparently there was nothing that made Shindou happier than the foods she revealed she wasn't supposed to eat. The list ended up being the majority of things most people ate on any given day. Akira wasn't sure if this was normal for girls or not-Ichikawa had bemoaned on more than one occasion the sad reality of dieting- because it seemed oddly extreme.

"I apologize for staying over," he began, flustered, once Shindou was sufficiently occupied with food.

"It's no problem," she completely waved him off, looking far more interested in her food. "Sorry for calling you out so late." She rebuked.

His eyes returned to their game from last night, fully recreated. They had stayed up almost the whole night discussing it, much to his delight. Shindou was such a wealth of knowledge; he was dead certain her ability to read ahead was simply unsurpassable, and he wondered how she would match up against the people he knew. He wondered where on earth she had managed to gain such skill. Who was her mentor? It was obvious she had one, her play too stylized for anything else. Although if he had to take a guess, the only apparent style he could relate it to was Honinbo Shusaku. A player like her shouldn't exist, emerging out of the ether, some indomitable and immutable force that came without rational explanation. But in a game like Go, this sort of power was not the sort of thing that could be conjured up out of nowhere.

"You're very talented." He found himself saying, as he traced his fingertips along the stones on the board. The magnetism kept them in place, even when he pressed a bit harder.

"Thanks," she replied, sounding uneasy. He'd said as much before; maybe she didn't like being complimented so much. It wasn't a

compliment though. It was a fact.

"I never asked you who your mentor was," he remarked offhandedly. "Did you study in a group? Or were you the only student?"

Shindou looked down, a complicated expression on her face.

He didn't notice, his attention still on the board. "You said you were originally from Japan... did you study here? Or in Korea?" He wasn't as well versed with the Korean masters as he was the Japanese, so it was possible she held a similar style to someone he wasn't aware of.

"Before, when we first played, your joseki reminded me of the mid-nineteenth century era. But you've moved away from that some, I think. I see some modern influences here." A more forceful move, where before he would have expected her to play around the shape.

"Touya-kun," she cut him off. Her voice was light and airy, but there was a hard glint in her eyes. "I would appreciate if you didn't ask."

He startled abruptly, dropping the stone in his hand. "Right, of course. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend."

She shook her head. "No, it's okay. I just... don't like talking about it."

"I see." He replied with a frown. The last thing he wanted to do was make her upset, so his curiosity would simply have to remain unsatisfied. "Well, would you like another game?"

Shindou sighed. "I'd love to play another game, but unfortunately I have plans for this afternoon."

A running theme, it seemed. "Do you know when you'll be free?"

"Hard to say," she hummed, twisting a lock of hair around her finger, as if to tame it. "Could be done by dinner, or go over time."

"We'll just have to postpone it then." He replied, trying to feel optimistic about it.

"I could text you when I'm done?" She offered.

It was on the tip of his tongue to agree, but he stopped just before it could leave his lips. "I wouldn't want to monopolize all your time." He said instead. "I know you're on vacation and all..."

Hikaru shook her head with a laugh. "I don't know why you have the impression I have something else I'd rather be doing." Akira looked away at that, a low flush rising to his cheeks.

"I like hanging out with you." Hikaru continued, smiling. "Playing Go or not."

His face really turned red at that, even as something warm curled in his stomach as he looked away. "Oh." He replied, lamely, feeling far too flustered to form a proper response. "Well, that's... me too." Was that okay? Was that weird to say? He flushed further, turning his face to stare out the window.

"Good." She beamed at him, swinging her legs to prop herself upright. Hikaru stretched with a noise of approval, before turning to look at him again. "Now I hate to kick you out, but I really do have to start getting ready for the day-you have no idea how long it can take to do hair and makeup."

"I don't think I want to imagine." He agreed with a small smile. "And that's alright; I should probably be getting home too."

Hikaru's expression turned worried. "Oh. Are you parents going to be mad?"

Honestly he had no idea. It occurred to him that he hadn't actually told them where he would be going, only that he would be out late. He wondered if they would be made to realize he'd stayed the night

at a girl's house... err, hotel room. Hell, that might sound even worse.

"I don't think so." He evaded the question, focusing instead on cleaning up the goban. "But I should probably get home all the same."

"Right." Hikaru nodded, not looking entirely convinced. "Well-I'll text you, then?"

Track 4:

STILL

Loco

" *Oh, Sai, I wasn't flirting with him.*" Hikaru rolled her eyes.

The ghost spared her a nonplussed look.

" *Much.* " Hikaru amended. " *I mean, it wasn't intentional! I was only being honest !*"

Sai folded his arms, sniffing. " *In my day, that would have been utterly scandalous, I'll have you know. You two slept in the same bed!*"

" *Where else was he going to sleep, the floor?*" Hikaru retorted. " *I don't care if that's the 'gentleman'-ly thing to do, that's utterly barbaric. The bed is perfectly large enough for both of us.*"

" *If he was a true gentleman, he would have never gotten in the situation in the first place!*" Sai replied flippantly.

" *Oh, that's right,*" Hikaru laughed. " *Because it's quite unseemly for a man and a woman to be alone together at all.* "

" *Precisely !*" Sai nodded with affirmation.

Hikaru scoffed, not particularly insulted. " *Well, welcome to 2016 my friend, where people show their legs when it's hot outside, and having short hair is a fashion statement, and wearing more than two layers of clothing is often considered copious and unnecessary .*"

Sai grumbled. " *I suppose I can admit, considering everything else that's changed I can see how these sort of social rules can get bent out of shape...*"

Then Sai fluffed himself up to his full height. " *But this-I think this is far more scandalous!*"

" *Why do you say that?*" Hikaru looked down at herself, pulling away a strap from her top, to let it snap back in place against her shoulder.

Her outfit wasn't outrageously revealing, although even for the temperamental mood swings the weather was having these days it was a little extreme. Hikaru was playing a guest on some sort of trite drama TV show-nothing as absurd or quite plain bad as Korean dramas, but pretty bad all the same. Fortunately this just meant her acting chops didn't have to be quite up to par. Which was good, because she had a thousand year old ghost distracting her from all her lines.

At any rate, she was wearing a very American summer kind of outfit-a neon tank top and high cut jean shorts-and was being made to speak in English.

She couldn't help but think Amber or Krystal would be far better for a role like this, being native speakers and all, but she supposed the producers would just have to deal with her as second best. That, and they were in Japan, and neither of them could speak the language all that well. Hikaru sighed, brushing her styled hair away from her neck to let in a breeze from the fans; as a guest appearance, most of her job seemed to be waiting around for her five lines to actually come into effect.

" I understand decorum has been thrown to the wayside in favor of more... pragmatic choices, although sometimes I wonder what the point of clothing is when it's so skimpy." He stared down at her. *" And that's not even mentioning this spectacle; look at those two!"* He pointed wildly with his fan. *"They're almost-almost copulating!"*

" Is that what you think having sex looks like?" Hikaru replied, raising a skeptical brow. *" That's a pretty sad rendition."*

He turned wide eyes to her as he flew into her face. *" And how would you know, hm?"* He asked, dangerously.

" Ah, well, you know, just... assuming ." She laughed it off nervously.

Sai didn't look wholly convinced, giving her the stink eye.

" Oh, look! I think it's my turn ." Hikaru casually drew his attention back to the situation at hand where, true to form, an assistant was making her way over to her.

"We're about to start your scene, Shindou-san," she informed pleasantly. "If you could follow me please?"

For this episode Hikaru was the cute foreign exchange student from California, attracting the eye of the whole class, plus the main male role-much to the chagrin of the main female role. Hikaru spent the whole episode flouncing around in bubbly naivety, giggling at boys and innocently brushing off all their requests for dates. She bounced around on a fake tennis court, where she accidentally wrecked the female protagonist, thereby making the jealousy even worse. Hikaru was not having even close to as much fun as her character was, mainly because the female protagonist seemed to *actually* be jealous of her. For being a famous idol? It wouldn't be surprising, and it certainly wouldn't be the first time it had happened.

In the end Hikaru and the lead female character settle their differences in a typical, superfluous and dramatic fashion only found in Asian dramas; some sort of school talent show-esque event.

Hikaru at least got to sing and dance a bit-but in the end it is revealed that Hikaru's character would prefer to return home to California.

" *Was this story supposed to make sense ?*" Sai wondered aloud, once all the scenes were done.

" *Not to normal people, no .*" Hikaru answered, amused.

" *You know, Hikaru-chan, I really think you work to much .*" Sai continued, as if picking up on a prior tangent, as she walked out of the recording building. " *Today you had this strange theater thing- yesterday you had to play geisha of some kind to all those people- before that you had that really rude man with the flashing box, and then that odd lady asking you all sorts of invasive questions... maybe you should take a break.*"

" *And play Go ?*" She returned, teasing.

" *No! Well, perhaps just a bit.*" He amended sheepishly. " *But you know, take a day to enjoy nature. Maybe go to the gardens? I remember the gardens at the emperor's palace were just glorious...*"

" *A garden ?*" Hikaru repeated, ponderous. " *Oh. Sai, that's not really something people do unless they're...*" She trailed off, eyes widening.

" *Unless...?*" Sai echoed, motioning for her to continue.

" *Nevermind. You know what, Sai, that's an excellent idea.*" Hikaru beamed at him. " *I'll go tomorrow. I don't think my manager has anything on the schedule.*"

" *That's wonderful!*" Sai clapped his hands. " *I'm quite excited to see how they've changed over the years.*"

" *I don't think you're going to be all that surprised, gardens are often intentionally historical.*" She pointed out.

Gardening had not really changed in the past thousand years; Hikaru was right, the shrubbery and landscaping techniques prevalent in his day were still in use today. So gardens hadn't changed, and incidentally, it was apparent neither had their purpose.

Sai had sort of forgotten that the emperor's gardens were not just his special place for solitude and peace; they were also the favored place for enamored men to bring court ladies far above their stature. It seemed there was no better way to hold a lady's attention than the pretense of looking at the flowers.

At any rate, the cultural gardens were full of couples enjoying the late afternoon sunshine-Shindou Hikaru and Touya Akira included.

"I've never actually been here," Touya commented, looking around with a slight smile.

"They're nice, right?" Hikaru nodded, also looking around.

Not too crowded, fortunately, and with plenty of winding paths to get lost in. There were a few families scattered about, little kids chasing around the ducks and butterflies with exasperated parents chasing after them, but for the most part the other garden patrons were couples, from teenagers like themselves to elderly couples with matching walking sticks.

"Yes, this is-nice." Touya had a way of making awkward look more like adorable, looking like he never quite knew what to make of her, but didn't mind tagging along for the ride anyway.

It was weird; Sai had mentioned before how surprising it was that the Go Touya played could come from such a polite and mild-mannered tenant. Hikaru could certainly see it when they played, in his sharp, burning expression that probably intimidated people twice his age. Like a dangerous dragon uncurling from within him. But otherwise he was always so... sweet. In fact, he was exactly the kind of boy you'd dream of asking to take you on a walk through the gardens. Hikaru

snickered quietly to herself; Sai had unintentionally made an excellent suggestion.

"I haven't been to a garden in ages," she enthused. "But the weather was so nice today, and a friend of mine told me I really should get out and slow down every once and a while, so I thought it would be fun to visit."

"Your friend gives good advice." Touya replied mildly. "You're quite the busy person, Shindou-san."

"There's no need for that." Hikaru returned with a laugh. "Call me Hikaru, Touya-kun."

If Sai wasn't already dead, he might have gone into cardiac arrest from that.

Touya only took a moment to recover. "Than it's only fair you call me Akira... Hikaru-chan."

Hikaru smiled. "Okay, Akira-kun."

" You said you weren't flirting with him!"

Hikaru didn't even look remotely abashed.

" I lied."

"How was school today?"

"I can't recall much of it to be honest." He answered sheepishly. "I find it hard to concentrate when I know I have a game coming up."

Hikaru nodded politely, and by some unspoken agreement they both began to walk further into the gardens. "Oh, that's right, you said you were in a few tournaments, right?"

"The Kisei and the Mejin." He supplied. Or at least, those were the two where he was far enough into them that it was even worth

mentioning.

After a beat, he added. "I will also be in the Hokuto Cup later this year. I don't believe it was officially announced yet, but I was told I would be competing."

"The Hokuto Cup?" Hikaru repeated aloud. She and Sai had looked up the modern tournaments after one of her conversations with Touya, but she hadn't heard of that. "Is that a professional tournament?"

"Sort of," Touya hedged, before explaining, "It's an international tournament only open to those under eighteen. Teams of three will be chosen from Japan, China and Korea to compete."

"Under eighteen?" Hikaru echoed, very surprised. "But-but... are there a lot of professionals under eighteen?"

"There are a few." Touya allowed slowly. "But not nearly as many as there are in Korea or China."

"So Japan's the underdog here." Hikaru surmised.

Touya nodded.

It clicked in her head. "Oh, is that why you were already chosen? I'm assuming there must be some kind of preliminary to make the team, if only three are allowed."

"Yes... and that's a bit of the problem." Touya sighed. "As I said, there are certainly other pros my age-but they're all still very new, and haven't yet had a chance to compete in any of the larger tournaments."

"So they lack experience." Hikaru noted.

"Yes, they do. And they haven't been pros for very long. It's not that I think they aren't talented..." He trailed off.

"They're just not as good as you?" Hikaru finished, grinning.

"Or you." Touya added, quietly.

Hikaru had no response to this. For a long moment neither said anything, his words sinking in deeper and deeper. Hikaru could feel Touya's eyes on her, burning with that same intensity as the day they played in the rain, when his eyes were so focused on her it was hard to breathe. They walked further into the gardens, speckled light spotting through the trees as they continued down a winding path. They seem to have been the only ones to choose this one, the scenic view quiet and undisturbed by anyone else.

"I wouldn't be playing for Japan anyway, you know." Hikaru finally said, joking lightly. She wasn't a Korean citizen, but she did live there. She supposed that would be enough to qualify her for competing for Korea in the Hokuto Cup-assuming she could as a non-professional, to begin with. It was all just hypothetical anyway; when would she ever get the time? She wasn't a professional Go player. She was an idol.

"I have no doubt you'd make it," he continued, without commenting on her point. "If you beat everyone else, I have no doubt they'd allow you to compete."

It seemed Touya was thinking the same thing as her. "I-I really couldn't..." She protested weakly.

"Hikaru," he said seriously, startling her. She had told him he could call her that, but it was still so strange to hear. It sounded so intimate, when he said it. Intimate and passionate. "You're probably better than the vast majority of players alive. I don't like arrogance, but I dislike unwarranted modesty just as much; I know I'm a strong player. I know I have a lot of room to grow, but I also have no doubts when it comes to my skill-and I have no doubt about yours, either. I've yet to even come close to beating you, Hikaru. Do you know what that means?"

He stopped walking, turning to face her. In that moment, the benevolent and considerate persona seemed to slip away from him, leaving the dangerous predator beneath.

"Um," Hikaru said, flustered. "I don't..."

"It means you're just as strong, if not stronger than any pro I know." He said, with quiet but unshakable conviction. "Japan, Korea, it doesn't matter. If you wanted, you could be in the Hokuto Cup. If you wanted, you could become a pro today."

For an endless moment, Hikaru did not know how to respond.

He's standing very close, she noted belatedly. Close enough that his bright eyes seemed to burn away at all the rest of the color in the world.

She took a step back. "I can't." She said, finally.

He blinked, before his gaze narrowed. "Why not?" He challenged.

"I can't." She said, again.

He stepped closer. "But why? You can't possibly be afraid of failing. Is it because of school? Or your job?"

"It's not-I'm not afraid," she recovered herself enough to say. "And, and yes. I have other obligations, I can't just decide to become a pro out of the blue like this..."

"If you're worried about money, I can assure you it won't be a problem. Especially not at your level of skill."

"It's definitely not that." Hikaru choked out.

"I don't understand." He frowned. "Do you not want to become a professional?"

"That's certainly a part of it." Hikaru replied.

"Why not?" Touya challenged. "You like playing, right?"

"Well, I suppose so, but the thought of being a pro never even crossed my mind." Hikaru shook her head. "It can't, anyway. I can't become a pro, that's just impossible."

He frowned further, brow furrowing. "I don't understand. You won't even consider it? What about entering in amateur tournaments?"

Hikaru shook her head again. "I can't do that, either."

"But *why*?" He asked again, frustrating apparent.

"I'm-" She took a helpless breath. "My name is Shindou Hikaru, but most people know me as CY. I'm the fourth member of SM's girl group fx."

Touya blinked. And then blinked again. Hard.

"I can't become a pro-I already have a job. I'm an idol."

It occurred to her then that she's never actually had to... tell someone that before. Most people either already knew this about her, or she simply just didn't tell them. She didn't just grow close to people like this, not normally. The vast majority of people she would consider friends have known her since pre-debut, and everyone else either figured it out on their own or didn't figure it out at all. Touya seemed to be the exception to that rule, though.

"You're an idol." He repeated, bewilderment coloring his features.

"Yes." Hikaru answered, with no small amount of hesitation and apprehension.

"So you..." His brow furrowed again, but this time in confusion.

"You're a singer...? Or a model...? Or an actress?"

She wasn't sure if he was thinking aloud or expecting an answer.

"Forgive me, I'm afraid I'm not entirely sure what that means." Touya said at length, still looking confused.

Hikaru was surprised into a laugh. "You and me both." She smiled ruefully. "I guess you could say I'm all of the above. It's just a title for a... celebrity, I suppose."

It was clear she wasn't actually doing much to illuminate him on the subject.

"I was casted off the street one day, walking home from school in Korea. After that I was a trainee for a couple years-and finally just last year I debuted with a group." She shrugged. "I sing, and dance. I act in terrible dramas. I take contracts for brand sponsorship if my manager thinks I should. I go on cheesy game shows."

Touya appeared to be at a loss for words.

"Oh." He said, finally. "Wow."

"It's not as-as, well, *whatever* as you might think it is." She protested quickly. "I'm still normal and stuff."

He didn't look particularly convinced, appraising her in a new light. "So... you're famous."

"Well, not *super* famous." Hikaru hedged, but it was clear the damage was already done.

Something flickered in Touya's eyes. He looked away.

"It's not really a big deal." Hikaru insisted, weakly. Even to her ears it sounded ridiculous. If her management company got what they wanted, it *would* be a big deal. It'd be as big a deal as Girl's Generation. Hikaru would never get to have a vacation like this again, wandering about in relative anonymity, assignments few and far between.

"Do you like it?" His question stirred her out of her reverie.

"Yeah." Hikaru answered, after a moment of thought. "I do."

It wasn't the life for everyone, but Hikaru had taken to it very well. She was loud and friendly; a lot of trainees struggled with public relations and acting classes, but Hikaru was very good at telling people what they wanted to hear. She loved to dance, she was good at singing. She was not a fiercely private person; if anything, she tended to over share. She liked clothes, and hair, and makeup, and she had never been under the illusion that being a star would be easy.

He shook his head then, expression returning into something soft and pleasant. "Well then I'm happy for you. It's nice to get to do what you love, isn't it?"

It was as much a peace offering as any. Hikaru nodded readily. "Yeah, it is."

I - TAEYEON ☐☐

I'm starting a soundcloud playlist for all of the tracks in the story - and probably the actual chapters too. It'll be under the user spacesmugger on soundcloud!

Chapter 3: I - TAEYEON ☐☐

Hikaru kept glancing at him as if she expected him to be mad. Akira wasn't really sure what to make of it-he definitely wasn't mad.

Disappointed, maybe. But not mad.

They ended up coming out the other side of the park and mutually deciding to get something to eat before playing a game. Akira decided he had no real reason to be upset; Hikaru had never lied to him. She may have omitted a lot, but she'd never outright lied. A lot of the odd bits and pieces of her clicked into place at the explanation of her occupation.

The only thing that still remained confusing to him is why she had ever decided to pick up a Go stone in the first place.

"I've never met an idol before." He said idly, after an uncomfortable length of silence had passed them by. But it had taken him a while for him to wrap his head around it, honestly.

Hikaru blinked at him. "I've never met a professional Go player." She returned, without missing a beat.

"You already know so much about it," he retorted. "But I'll admit I'm not very well-versed in the world of idols."

Hikaru hummed thoughtfully. "What do you want to know?"

He pursed his lips in thought. As they broke through the tree line they were very nearly run over by a group of kids on bikes. The park seemed far busier than it had been when they had first made off down the path. Primary school had probably been let out, explaining the onslaught of small children.

"What's your favorite part about it?" He decided on, after deliberation.

"Dancing." She answered immediately, side stepping around a yappy little dog on a leash walking by them with its haggard owner.

"Least favorite part?"

"Acting. I'm pants at it." She glanced at him. "Your turn."

He blinked. "My turn?"

"What's your favorite part about being a Professional Go player?" She turned around.

He'd never thought of it that way. What didn't he like? He got to play the game he loved as a career; it didn't get much better than that.

"Oh." He said, after a beat. "My favorite part would be playing Go." He answered, rather lamely. That should have been obvious.

Hikaru looked as if she was fighting off a smile. "And your least favorite part?"

"Teaching games." That was easy. "They can be especially trying sometimes."

Another gaggle of young kids swarmed past them, shouting loudly about hunting Pokemon. Hikaru just barely dodged out of the way, sparing them an annoyed look. "Sorry, sorry!" One of the boys spun around to shout over his shoulder, before taking off with his friends.

Hikaru scowled. "Kids these days." She tisked. "When did it get so crowded, anyway? Maybe going to the park was a bad idea."

She turned to him brightly. "I'm kind of hungry - do you want to find something quick to eat?" She suggested. To be honest, he felt rather ambivalent to the idea, until she added, "Then we can head back and play a game or something."

He nodded quickly. "Sure - let's do it." Food and then a game with Shindou. It was nice to be back on familiar territory.

Track 5:

Sorry (□□□)

Heize

The call to come back to Korea came all too soon.

In reality, it was actually a week or two late. But her manager had mentioned something about contracting issues with upper management, so the whole company had been put on hiatus for a bit. Now that it was worked out, fx was scheduled to start working on their next album.

And Hikaru was tasked with coming up with her own mini album.

"A solo album? Me?" She balked on the phone with her manager, perhaps a bit too loudly for the hotel breakfast bar.

"It'll be a great opportunity." Her manager offered.

Well sure, but usually only well established artists dropped solo albums. Despite being a bit of a cult-favorite, fx - and by extension Hikaru - didn't have the fan base for something like that.

"... Right..." Hikaru replied uneasily, biting her lip. "Am I going to tour for it too?"

"We're thinking of doing something trendy online." He replied. "Maybe release it on SM Station, or have it an exclusive for a streaming service."

She breathed a sigh of relief. The idea of writing two albums, followed up by two tours, sounded overwhelming.

Of course, there was another obvious problem.

"Am I writing it myself?"

"The writing team will help you of course. But it would be nice if you could at least come up with some themes for the songs. We want it to be personal - intimate." He went on to explain. "You know, songs about love, adventure, dreams, ambitions, childhood sweethearts, things like that. Related back to your own experiences."

This sounded more like a school writing assignment than an album in the making. And what experiences was he referring to? How was she supposed to make a song about love when she'd never had the opportunity to be in love before?

Why me, she wanted to ask. Quite frankly, SM Town had a lot of amazing artists to promote, and that was to say nothing of the other members of fx. She would have picked Amber for the solo album; she was the fan favorite after all. Or Krystal, even, but that might be a bit much on top of her show.

"Oh. Okay." She replied, after a beat. She didn't know what else to say, really.

"We want to really connect with the Japanese pop market," he continued offhandedly, and then it clicked in her head. "So we'll release a Korean and Japanese version, alright?"

"Yeah, of course. Should I write it in Japanese?"

"Yes. We'll have the writing team help with the translating - but we want it to be authentic to the market."

She nodded along, thoughts turning around in her head. It was a daunting assignment - she would never consider herself a particularly talented writer - but it was a great opportunity for her nonetheless. Certainly not one she could pass up

"Your flight out is booked for tomorrow first thing in the morning; is that okay with you, or should I reschedule?"

This gave Hikaru pause.

"Oh, no, tomorrow should be fine." She returned, faintly. It shouldn't be a surprise, but returning to Korea felt unexpected nonetheless.

She had no real reason to say no, even though she found herself disappointed and taken aback at the abrupt departure.

Then she wondered what Touya would think, and her stomach dropped further.

"We'll have a car waiting for you at the airport." He assured, before adding. "You've got a meeting with the record department scheduled for that afternoon. Don't worry about attire."

"Right, thanks." She said, and it sounded dead even to her ears. They said their goodbyes soon after that.

Hikaru sighed, flopping onto her hotel bed. It was starting to feel like her bed, honestly, which meant she had already been here for longer than she should. She looked around blankly; it was going to be a huge pain to pack everything up.

Sai floated over to her with a worried expression. " *Is everything alright?* "

She looked up at him, confused at first, before realizing he would have no way of understanding a conversation held in Korean. "Oh - everything is fine," she reassured him, with a smile that didn't quite meet her eyes. "I'm just... I'm leaving tomorrow."

" *Tomorrow?* " He balked. " *That's so soon !*"

"I know." She let out a weary breath, dragging herself upright. "But to be honest, I've kind of been waiting for this to happen. I'm long overdue to return."

Sai tilted his head curiously. " *So you will return, then? To this Seoul place?* "

"Yep. I'm assuming you're coming with me." She added. "Don't worry - they play Go over there too."

Sai nodded, looking a bit glum still. " *That is very relieving to hear .*" He admitted. " *And I'm quite excited to see all the foreign play styles. I'll miss playing Touya, however.* "

"Me too." She agreed wholeheartedly. Saying goodbye to Touya would be difficult, but she'd have to do it.

"I should see what he's up to." She remarked thoughtfully, before frowning at her phone. Judging from the time of day he was most likely still at school.

Sai perked up at that. " *Do you think you could ask him for one last game?* "

"I was counting on it."

Hikaru was never one to be self-conscious, but she could see how someone could feel awkward in her current situation.

Every single person stared as they passed her, all the students pouring out of the building sparing her a long moment of attention - not all of it in a good way, but all of it more or less what she would expect. Girls either looked at her with awe or envy, which was predictable enough - the boys were even more predictable.

" *They're like a pack of animals!* " Sai noted with horror. " *It's utterly obscene!* "

" *It's really not that strange,* " Hikaru returned lazily, unfazed with all the attention. If she hadn't wanted attention, she would have dressed in incognito. But she didn't have the energy right now to put up a disguise - and what did it matter if people saw her? She was leaving tomorrow anyway.

" *This happens often?* "

" *They might know who I am - or they might just be envious of my style .* " Hikaru replied with humor.

She looked like she'd walked off a magazine cover - not too far from the truth, actually. She was supposed to post some kind of photo of herself once a week, and today was that day. Instagram was practically the new magazine cover.

It was only a matter of time before a group of boys approached her; judging from their sports bag she assumed they were part of some sports club. They were nice enough, but she wasn't really in the mood to entertain.

"Excuse me for a second," she interrupted them, before they could ask her out. "I think I see someone I know."

Funnily enough, that wasn't even a lie.

The moment she turned around and pretended like she was looking for someone, she found someone.

"Akari!" She hollered, loud enough to carry to the other side of the school gates.

The girl stilled, turned around, and then dropped her bag in surprise with a scream. "Hikaru?!"

Hikaru left the dumbfounded group of boys without a backwards glance, leaping at her old childhood friend. Akari laughed delightedly, squeezing her so tight she was starting to find it hard to breathe.

"I can't believe you're here!" She cried, with wide eyes. "What - When did you get here? What are you doing here?"

"Uh, I got here a little bit ago." Hikaru hedged, feeling a little guilty that she'd forgotten to tell Akari she was in town. Truth be told it'd been so long since she'd seen the girl, and she'd gotten a bit distracted, what with getting possessed by a ghost and all. "I'm on leave! I'm going back tomorrow though, unfortunately."

"That's a shame." Akari pouted. Hikaru laughed sheepishly. "But nevermind that! It's so good to see you! What are you doing at Kaio?"

"I was - uh - looking for someone, actually." She revealed. "I didn't even know you went here! How do you like it?"

"You know me, always so studious." Akari replied bashfully. "I couldn't believe I managed to get into Kaio though - but I love it here. Everyone's such an academic."

Hikaru rolled her eyes. "Of course you do."

"Enough about me, what about you?" She was practically bursting at the seams. "How are you? What are you up to? Wow, I have so *much* I want to ask you, you have no idea."

Hikaru chuckled uneasily. "It's not as glamorous as you think, honestly."

It was Akari's turn to roll her eyes. "Nonsense!" She exclaimed, before she did a double take, remembering the girls she'd been walking with. She motioned for them to come over. "Rio-chan, Shiharu-chan!" She directed towards the two, one with a cute cut of short, curly hair, and the other with longer, straight hair and a curious smile. "This is my childhood friend Hikaru." They seemed nice enough - very cute and trendy, but friendly too.

Hikaru waved with a bright smile. "Hi! Nice to meet you two."

Akari leaned in with a conspiratory grin. "She's a k-pop star." She revealed smugly. "She's part of fx"

Rio gasped. "You're Cy!" She realized with a cry of shock. "Oh my gosh, I just bought your album!"

"Really? That's great to hear!" Hikaru beamed happily, before giving a slight bow. "I'm honored - thank you."

"I'm a big fan." Rio rushed to say. "Oh wow, this is so cool. Akari-chan, I can't believe you never told me!"

"To be honest, it sort of slipped my mind." Akari replied sheepishly.

"So Hikaru-san is famous?" Shiharu blinked, before smiling warmly. "That's so fun! What's it like?"

"Very busy," Hikaru answered easily, well used to this line of questioning. "But always interesting."

"Do you know Oh Sehun?" Shiharu asked with a blush. "He's my favorite."

"Ah - I've met him a few times." Hikaru hedged, never particularly comfortable answering questions about other famous people, even if she did actually know them very well. "Exo is a lot of fun - they're usually all really rowdy, but Sehun is actually quite shy."

"Is he?" Shiharu asked, peeking over Akari's shoulder with wide, enamored eyes. "He seems like he would be." She noted quietly. "He never talks much on the game shows."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure they make him uncomfortable." Hikaru laughed. "But then again, they make most people uncomfortable."

"Do you not like them either, Hikaru-san?" Rio asked curiously.

"Me? Oh no, I tend to like them a lot." She replied with a grin. "I don't really mind looking silly on TV."

"And you do look ridiculous sometimes." Akari concurred. "That segment where you and Jungkook cross dressed was so funny."

"From BTS?" Rio exclaimed with excitement. "You were on TV with him?"

"Regularly, actually." Hikaru admitted. "For some reason, we end up paired up a lot."

She and Shiharu exchanged sly looks. Rio turned back to her with glinting eyes. "Is that so? What do you think about him? Do you think he's cute?"

Hikaru blinked, not really sure how to respond. "Sure. He's very good looking." Just like everyone else in the business.

Rio and Shiharu dissolved into giggles. Akari rolled her eyes, playfully pushing them away. "Sorry about them, Hikaru. They're total fangirls."

"Oh no, not at all - it's great to meet fans." Hikaru reassured with a pretty smile, only half-lying. Sometimes it really sucked to meet fans, but never these kind.

"Oh yeah, Hikaru, didn't you say you were looking for someone?" Akari tilted her head. "Who is it? We might be able to help you find them."

"Well, that's - " Hikaru found herself flushing slightly. "I don't really know... You might not know him."

" *Him* ?" Akari repeated with a look of utter delight. "It's a boy? What year is he in? Are you dating him? Is he cute?"

She probably shouldn't be all that surprised about this line of questioning, but she found herself at a loss for words all the same.

" *Yes Hikaru - are you dating him* ?" Sai turned to her with a raised eyebrow and a nonplussed expression.

Hikaru ignored him.

"I don't know what year - the same as you, I would assume. We're not dating. Sure, I think he's good-looking." She answered quickly and diplomatically. "His name is Touya Akira, do you know him?"

The girls looked thoughtful.

"Touya-san from class 2?" Shiharu blinked. "He's the one who's gone a lot, right?"

"Eh? What for?" Akari turned to her with surprise.

"He's a professional," Shiharu explained. "I don't remember what he does, though."

"He's a Go player." Hikaru offered.

"Oh, I think I remember hearing about that." Rio commented, tapping her chin. "Is he in the Go club, then? He might be there."

"Why would he be in the club if he's a professional?" Akari replied, perplexed.

Fortunately for them all, the subject in question was exiting the school doors behind them, preoccupied with his phone, unaware of the commotion around him.

"Akira-kun!" She called, waving her hand to flag him down when he looked up at his name.

" *Akira* -kun, huh?" Akari repeated, with an impish smirk.

Hikaru made a point to ignore that too.

Touya looked very surprised to see her here. He looked even more surprised - and apprehensive - to see her surrounded by other girls from his school. They looked vaguely familiar to him, so perhaps they were in his year. But why were they talking to Hikaru? Had they just come up to her? Were they fans who recognized her? The thought made him anxious. They weren't going to take photos, were they?

Hikaru smiled at him brightly as he neared. He had to admit, despite his apprehension he was happy to see her. He could understand the commotion everyone was making around them; she certainly lived up to her celebrity status today, looking like she'd stepped off a magazine cover. To be fair, she always kind of looked like that, though. Her very existence still boggled him.

"Hikaru-chan." He greeted with surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"I was waiting for you," Hikaru replied drily, in a tone that meant that should have been obvious.

"Oh." He returned, at a loss as to how to respond, especially with three sets - and more, if he added everyone pretending not to eavesdrop around them - of eyes on him.

"Oh yeah - Akira-kun, this is my childhood friend Akari." She introduced with a flourish. "And these are her two friends Rio-chan and Shiharu-chan."

All the girls greeted him. He smiled back, feeling somewhat uncomfortable. "Hello," he said, politely. "It's nice to meet you all. What classes are you in?"

"We're all from class 3," Shiharu offered with a disarming smile.
"You're the professional Go player, right?"

"Um, yes, that's correct." Was that how everyone knew him here?

"Actually, I came here hoping you were free for a game." Hikaru revealed cheerfully.

"Eh? What? Hikaru, you play Go?" Akari looked at her in surprise.
"When did that happen?"

Hikaru laughed it off uneasily. "Ah, it's a bit of a... uh... recent development."

"That's really cool though, that you play. I wouldn't have expected that." Rio remarked, looking equally as surprised.

Me either, Rio. Hikaru agreed.

She missed the pensive look Touya shot in her direction.

"Is it fun?" She asked.

"You mean Go?" Hikaru clarified, taken aback, though it was clear that was what Rio was referring to. She thought for a moment. "Yeah - it's a lot of fun. It's really interesting."

"Really?" Rio hummed thoughtfully. "Maybe I'll pick it up then. It sounds cool."

Touya looked like he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"I'll do it too, Rio-chan." Shiharu decided, beaming at her friend. Rio turned to her, looking equally as blindsided as Touya. "Well, you'll need someone to play with, right? And this way, we can learn together!"

"Huh? Both of you?" Akari looked skeptically at them.

"Sure, if Cy plays it, why not?" Rio returned with a giggle and a conspiratory wink in Hikaru's direction.

"Is this going to be the new trendy thing to do?" Akari whined, rolling her eyes. "Well, whatever. I guess I could try it out too."

"Great! Let's stop by the Go club tomorrow!" Shiharu proposed enthusiastically.

"Isn't our Go club really good though?" Rio replied, worried. "I thought it was exclusive."

"Touya-san can teach us then, right?" Akari jumped in, looking all but triumphant as she practically cornered the boy.

"Huh? Um, yes, if you like." He agreed, still looking utterly bewildered.

"Great!" Akari cheered. Hikaru couldn't help but think her childhood friend had an ulterior motive - namely, forcing Touya to hang out with them so she could casually pry information out of him. "Anyway, you guys were gonna go, right?" She segued smoothly - far too smoothly. "We should get going guys - we don't want to hold them up."

Shiharu and Rio nodded their agreement.

Akari shoved them both in the direction of the school gates, turning back with a bright grin. "It was nice seeing you Hikaru! Send me a text once in awhile!"

"I wil!" Hikaru promised with a wave of farewell.

"Or at least a snapchat!" Akari hollered, before they disappeared around the corner.

For a moment, even Hikaru didn't know what to say.

"I can't believe I met Akari again," she said, once she'd overcome the surrealness of the situation. "It's been so long - I had no idea she

went to the same school as you."

"She's a childhood friend?" Touya asked lightly.

"Yeah, we grew up next door to each other." Hikaru offered, as they left the school grounds. "We were best friends until I moved to Korea."

Touya appeared to be thinking this over - looking a little *too* thoughtful, actually, but maybe he was preoccupied with another matter.

"They seem nice." He remarked, vaguely. "They... seemed to know who you are."

Hikaru nodded, rather shyly. "Yeah, Rio-chan said she was a fan."

"Does that happen often?" He asked, still curious over the whole lifestyle. He couldn't imagine being famous like that.

Sure, in the Go world people certainly knew his name - he was probably the most famous Go player currently. Infamous might be a better word, really. At any rate he had definitely had fans come up to him at events before, or at the Go parlor, but having random people off the street seemed like a whole different level entirely.

"Not in Japan." Hikaru hedged; Touya could infer then that it must happen fairly often back in Korea.

"So did you want to go to your salon, or should we just pick somewhere close?" Hikaru changed the subject quickly.

Touya didn't miss a beat. "It doesn't really matter. Anywhere will work."

Hikaru whipped out her phone, tapping over to her map. "Cool, I'll look it up then."

Touya couldn't help but study the girl next to him as they walked. This wasn't the first time he'd noticed how random people would turn and stare at her, but now he wondered if it was because of her level of attractiveness or her level of fame. Most likely a combination of both. She had on a plaid shirt thrown over a rather revealing crop top that showed off her midriff, and the short shorts that were so popular these days, her hair thrown up in a ponytail. She looked - well, nice, he supposed. She always looked nice though, so he wasn't sure if it was the outfit either.

He frowned down at her as she scrutinized her phone, remembering her friend's words from earlier.

Akari had been completely surprised to hear Shindou played Go.

And Akira was just as surprised to hear that.

Shindou's skill level was... extraordinary. It seemed almost impossible, considering her age. There were a lot of Go prodigies - Touya himself included - and none of them had ever reached that level of skill in such a short amount of time. And apparently it was even shorter than Touya had expected. He'd assumed she must have started at the same time he did, but from her friend's remark that clearly wasn't the case.

It didn't make any sense, though. Unless Shindou was just really that exceptional. But even *that* seemed rather hard to believe.

But how else could he possibly explain it? Shindou shouldn't exist and yet here she was texting away beside him, as if it wasn't completely mind blowing that she was even here at all. She was a pop star. She was an *idol*. She shouldn't be a go player.

The more he thought on it, the more he realized how absolutely absurd it really was.

There was nothing else to it, though. How could there be? As outlandish as it may sound, Shindou Hikaru was really that good.

She wasn't cheating - that was absurd. Akira had played her far too many times to even entertain the thought. She had a very unique style - not the sort of thing she could have made up by looking at lots of games. Her talent was as true as his own, if not twice as blinding.

"Ah!" She said, stirring him out of his thoughts. "It says there's one a couple blocks from here."

"Alright, which way?"

Shindou blinked sheepishly, turning around a couple times before pointing left. "That way. I'm pretty sure."

"Pretty sure, huh?" Akira echoed wryly.

"Well we'll figure out soon enough, right?" She replied, just as cheeky.

Waya stretched his arms over his head, grumbling about his backache. Playing Go hunched over like that always made him feel like an old man - he couldn't help it though, sometimes the game got so intense he just found himself subconsciously leaning forward.

"Do you want another game?" Isumi asked casually, flipping a go stone in his hand before dropping it back into his go ke.

Waya made a noncommittal noise. "I should," he grouched. "I have that game against Ochi next week. Hell if I lose to him in the Oza tournament!"

"He's past the first round in the Tengen already, isn't he?" Isumi said thoughtfully, scratching his chin.

"Exactly! That's why I can't lose! I have to make it past the first rounds too - I can't fall behind that jerk!" Waya insisted.

Isumi chuckled good-naturedly. "I have full faith you'll catch up to him." He assured.

"That I have to catch up at all is the problem." Waya retorted darkly, folding his arms.

Isumi leaned back in his chair, stretching out his legs. "You'll catch up to him, surpass him, and then he'll catch up to you and do the same." He noted cheerfully.

Waya did not look amused. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means you two are rivals," Isumi explained, succinctly. "It's nice, isn't it?"

" *Nice ?*" Waya balked.

"Yeah - that feeling of competing against someone, of having someone by your side fighting you every step of the way. It's rare, you know." Isumi shook his head, almost enviously. "You two don't really see it, but you two really light up with passion whenever the other is around - even the mention of you tends to bring out Ochi's best."

Waya looked stunned. Then he sniffed, looking embarrassed. "You make it sound like we're lovers or something!" He complained, loudly.

Isumi only smiled. "Opposite sides of the same coin." He pointed out.

Waya made an annoyed harrumph, even if privately he could admit he saw Isumi's point. But they were definitely, firmly, on *that* side of the coin; there was no ambiguity to it. Waya shriveled his nose. Ew. Just imagining him and Ochi together was totally gross. Even if Waya did like other boys, it was Ochi.

At any rate, Isumi was right. Loathe as he was to admit it, whenever he thought of Ochi beating him, of surpassing him in the tournaments, of rising through the ranks - he found himself sieged with an intense, renewed determination to win. It was something about the competitive nature it lit inside him that always did bring the best out of him.

And yeah, when he thought about it, he could assume the other side of that coin was the same. After all, wasn't that why people brought their girlfriends to watch them play? Knowing the person you love was watching could probably be just as stimulating.

"Can you imagine the whole coin?" He found himself asking aloud.

Isumi's brows did a crazy dance. "Oh, so you *are* thinking about it?" He asked coolly, smirking.

Waya flushed. "No! Not like that!" He protested. "Just - in general, you know? It would just... I dunno. I can't even think about it."

Isumi spared him some mercy, his chuckles dying down as he thought on Waya's comment seriously.

"It would be odd, wouldn't it?" He agreed, at length. "Having both those feelings wrapped up in the same person - I wouldn't know what to do with myself."

"Me either." Waya admitted. And then, pointedly. "And it would never happen to me, by the way. Not unless Ochi managed to turn himself into a cute girl overnight -

He noticed Isumi's attention had been drawn elsewhere, trailing off. He was looking at something behind Waya.

Waya frowned. "What's that look for?"

"Ah? It's nothing." Isumi replied, shaking his head. "I just didn't know Touya came to this salon."

Waya almost leapt to his feet. " *Touya* ? Where?"

"Don't make a scene." Isumi hissed, kicking him in the shin before he did something rash. "And don't stare."

"I'm not." Waya retorted petulantly, making an obvious effort to keep himself focused on the game. "What do I care what that guy does or not? He's at perfect liberty to go to whatever go salon he wants; even if it's ridiculous, because why pay when your father owns one?" He shook his head with a snort. "Well, whatever. Nigiri?"

Isumi nodded. "Sure."

It was a relief that Waya was acting mature about it - even if he knew that was only because he was trying to make a point to Isumi right now that he could. Otherwise he would have already strolled over to where he was sitting and demanded to know what he was doing. And Isumi would prefer to avoid that scenario, especially because Touya wasn't alone.

Even though he told Waya not to stare, he found himself chancing a few curious glances anyway.

He couldn't really help it though, because Touya was playing with a girl. A girl their age.

His back was turned towards them, the girl sitting opposite. They'd strolled in laughing about something; Touya had paid both their fees, and now they were sitting across from each other at a table not unlike Isumi and Waya's - so small, lopsided, and so cramped their knees were knocking together. And unlike Waya and Isumi, who frequently got annoyed with all of that, they took it all in stride, laughing it off.

He hated to make assumptions, but it just sort of seemed like... they were on a date.

A date to play Go. Isumi paused. Man was Touya one lucky guy. If he tried to pull that on his current girlfriend she'd probably ignore him for a week.

Still, that was Touya's business, and Isumi wasn't the kind of guy to pry.

How very like Shindou, Touya thought happily, as she opened the game with a nineteenth century crosswise formation that had been all the rage about a hundred years ago, but floated about in the sands of history as too soft for modern play. And to be fair, Touya would have pushed in closer if he had been black, but he enjoyed the antiquity of their opening hands.

Shindou was rubbing off on him, he noted with belated surprise. Of course she was. They played frequently, and each and every game was one he painstakingly went over multiple times, writing them down, dissecting them into just a few hands to go over the myriad of alternate patterns.

But if Shindou was rubbing off on him, then he was rubbing off on Shindou as well.

He cut off her shape in the top left; she responded with a pincer, to his surprise. He would have expected her to start a mutual diagonal pattern, but instead she had played a more modern hand with a pincer at the top edge. It was the sort of thing *he* would do.

He smiled thinly. He wondered just what else she had learned from him.

He actually stopped the game a few hands later, something he never did, unless he was playing against his father. To stop the game for clarification implied a level of Shidou go to a game; a casualness only found in teacher and student. He bit his lip. He desperately wanted to ask her why she played such a simple hand at center left, instead of the peep closer to the edge. It was the sort of thing he'd

ask his father. It was a bit strange to think that, subconsciously, he thought of himself as the learner, and Shindou as the teacher.

He mentally shook his head. He wanted to know, but he also didn't want to stop the game. This wasn't a teaching game - he intended to see it through. He played his hand where he thought Shindou should have gone in the first place, wondering how she would respond. She probably played her move to avoid a ko fight in the upper right - regardless, his move was flawless. So well played in fact, Shindou actually hesitated before her next hand, surveying the board for a few more thoughtful moments.

Then he blinked, as she played her next hand. It was true, his move gave White the opportunity to hem in Black, but Black's next move forced him to respond in the bottom right, foregoing their battle at the top to play an answering extension to her move. So he might have cut into her territory, but she still came out alive at the top edge.

He leaned back in his chair, confident he could read her next few moves. It was strange to think it had gotten to a point that he felt he could do it with reasonable certainty; her classical style meant he couldn't just infer what move she would play from how most would approach the shape. Like most of the talented professionals he played with, he had to know her style before he could accurately read ahead. Except those professionals normally had years worth of kifu trailing behind them to study; all Touya had were the games they had already played.

At any rate, they had played enough times for him to get a feel for her style, but not nearly enough, in his opinion.

He wanted to play more games with her. He wanted to hear her thoughts on every single move, he wanted to argue about ko threats, soft moves and hard moves, shapes that were too over-concentrated or too thin, and why the hell didn't she play that peep?

His brow raised in surprise.

He thought she'd play right below the upper right star point. But instead she'd gone for the move *he* would have played - in his opinion the more attractive option if he was Black, giving territory away to White but gaining back the pace of the game. It was a hard, risky move, far more aggressive than her usual style, but he had full confidence she could back it up.

By her side, Sai laughed heartily at Touya's surprised expression.

" *Sai, are you up to no good?*" She couldn't help but tease, taking her eyes off the board for a moment.

" *Never!* " The ghost swore. " *I was just... what did you call it? Giving him a sip of his own medicine?* "

" *A taste,*" she corrected with humor. " *A taste of his own medicine .*"

" *Yes, well, Touya-kun tends to play quite aggressively. One of his strong points, I would say .*" Sai unfolded his fan, obscuring the bottom of his face. Hikaru couldn't tell if his expression was pensive or amused - and she was fairly sure that's how Sai wanted it. " *It's what makes him such a good player; he has that knack of stretching that little bit as far as he can, picking up points despite the thinness of his shape.*"

Hikaru blinked. She understood it... sort of. At the very least, she could tell a 'thin' shape from a more robust one.

Just before Touya played his next move, Hikaru's gaze darted to the salon behind him. A boy around their age was staring at them - he averted his gaze when he caught her watching him back. Hikaru wondered if he'd recognized her or something.

She turned her attention back to the game when Sai called his next move.

Touya held his breath, finding himself quietly humbled by the many times Shindou had managed to amaze him in their small amount of

time together.

It was an exquisite *testuji*, a worthy answer to his move above it on the board. He can't help but marvel on her hands as they unfolded. She cut off the decisive hane he had been meaning to play a few hands later; their short skirmish ended in even exchange. Her new cluster spread his territory thin in the top left, but he had come out of the fight with the cap in the center.

As always, her end game was flawless. It should have been irritating, but he was happy to see it. She won their final fight with a skilful grace he had come to expect from her in yose .

He stared at the finished game for a moment, before relaxing back in his chair. He didn't have to say it out loud - they both knew who won.

Two hundred and fifty-nine moves. 2 point difference. Nothing less than what he'd expect from her.

Meanwhile, Hikaru was having the same thought. 2 point win, two hundred plus moves, and three hours of her life that she'd just spent in this dingy basement salon. And quite frankly, she wasn't sure if there was anything else she'd rather be doing on her last day in Japan.

The thought made her maudlin.

She was leaving.

Tomorrow.

And then all of a sudden the tops of her hands were wet. She stared at them in surprise, held together in her lap. With her head bowed like this, it was impossible to miss the falling droplets as they fell into her lap. Actually, she was bewildered with herself.

Touya was even more bewildered. He looked up, feeling refreshed even after a loss, only to see Shindou curled in on herself, shoulders

tight as her bangs fell over her face. His eyes widened in nothing short of pure terror, as he bolted upright.

"Shin - *Hikaru*, " he amended quickly. "What's - um, are you okay?"

She made what could have been a nod, sniffing slightly.

If possible he looked even more horrified, half out of his chair, without any idea what to do.

"Then - what's wrong? You know you won, right?" He added, jokingly.

She choked on a bubble of laughter, gracefully wiping away the wetness beneath her eyes without smearing her makeup in what was obviously a practiced movement. He wondered almost absently if that was something they taught her in training, too. She nodded through her laughter, smiling slightly.

"Yeah, I know," she agreed, wryly. She sniffed a bit again, bowing her head again to wipe her eyes.

He still felt completely out of his element - as he often did, when Shindou was around - and uncomfortably confused as to what to do next.

When she lifted her head again, her eyes were dry, but her expression was still forlorn.

"Sorry, I don't know what came over me." She apologized breezily, smiling as if the last few minutes hadn't happened at all. "I don't usually... cry like that." She frowned down at the board.

"There's no need to apologize." He assured her, still bewildered. "So... I'm guessing it has nothing to do with the game," he started, cautiously. "Did something else happen?"

"Yeah, kind of." She nodded. She bit her lip. "I'm leaving."

It felt like the floor had dropped from underneath him. He'd always heard the expression and thought it foolish, but experiencing it in person he understood exactly how accurate it really was; he just... felt numb. Like he no longer could even remember his own sense of balance. Or maybe just that his own vertigo didn't matter in the face of what he was hearing. He sat back down, blinking rapidly.

"When?" He managed to get out.

"Tomorrow." She revealed.

Tomorrow .

He let out a long breath. Tomorrow. Well. That was...

"Oh." Was all he could say.

"I found out this morning," she continued on, voice quiet but even.
"I'm sorry it's such late notice..."

"There's nothing to be sorry for," he found himself saying. "This is good, isn't it? It's what you've been waiting for."

"That's true..." She trailed off, shaking her head. "I guess it's just so abrupt."

He nodded silently.

"I wish you'd told me before." He confessed, suddenly. "Before the game, I mean."

Shindou was watching him closely, waiting for him to continue, but his gaze was lowered to the board in front of them.

"I would've..."

"Played differently?" She filled in with a slight smile.

"I suppose so." He conceded. "It's just, if I had known it was our last game I would have - I don't know." He wanted to say he would have played harder, but that wasn't true. He was already playing his best, giving their games the same attention he gave his league matches. He supposed the atmosphere was different - nothing was on the line when they played.

"You would have played every move like it was your last." Hikaru pointed out. She shrugged, then. "Maybe I didn't want you to play like that."

He frowned. "Would that really have been so bad?"

She shook her head. "Not really," she conceded, "but I wouldn't want to go back to Korea and recreate this game and wonder why you made this move, and then remember the only reason you played such an awful, hasty move was because you were thinking about me leaving."

"I would never play an awful, hasty move." He retorted on instinct. She was baiting him, he knew, but he took it anyway. Maybe he wanted to be baited - maybe he wanted to pretend like this wasn't their last game. Maybe he wanted to argue over moves like they usually did; two opposite styles clashing and melding together.

Shindou looked relieved too. Maybe he wasn't the only one who wanted to remember this memory fondly.

"Okay, well then tell me what this is then, huh?" She arched a brow, pointing to the right edge of the board.

"What are you talking about?" He asked in return. "That wasn't hasty. What was I supposed to do, after your play by the star point?"

Hikaru shrugged. "You chose a thick move, even if it meant losing time to go back there." She hesitated a moment, before sighing. "Although it's impossible to tell how many points it was worth."

"Agreed," he conceded immediately. "But I still don't think it was a bad move."

"Not for the shape, no, but it gave me control over this fight up here, see?" She sat up a little bit, pointing to her side of the board. As always whenever Shindou had something to say, he found himself listening with rapt attention. "Although if you'd cut here, it would have been catastrophic for me." She pointed out, to his surprise. He hadn't seen that at all, too busy reading her next few hands in anticipation for their fight in the bottom right corner.

"I suppose..." He allowed at length. "But then what would I have done here? You would have encroached anyway, making the whole play meaningless..."

Isumi chanced quite a few more glances at the couple across the room from them, only successfully chastised when the girl caught him staring. He didn't want to be rude, but...

At any rate it was impossible *not* to look when all of a sudden the girl started crying. It wasn't loud enough to hear, but it was sudden. Fortunately Waya was still pondering his move in the bottom corner, completely oblivious to the scene behind him.

After a few moments she calmed down, and the two started what he could only assume was a heated discussion of their game. He found himself a bit stunned; he'd never seen Touya make even half of those expressions before. Surprise, confusion, annoyance, amusement - they all flittered over his face in complete contrast to the Touya he normally knew. The Touya he saw was always composed, or silently determined, or politely making small talk whenever it was necessary for him. It's not as if he wasn't unkind, if anything he was very kind. But it was still hard to approach the other boy; his unshakable demeanor and his infamous reputation too large a channel to cross. But not for everyone, clearly. That girl didn't seem to have any issues seeing past all that.

By the time he and Waya had finished up their third game, the sky was dark and Touya and the mysterious girl had already left. Their board was still cluttered with stones; when they had started cleaning up the cashier politely stopped them. The shopkeeper, more than pleased to have such a famous Go player in his salon, asked if they could keep it on the board for him to write down later.

Isumi purposefully walked the long way around when they left so he could take a look at it.

"Oi!" Waya protested, when he stopped abruptly. "What'd you do that for?"

Isumi simply pointed to the table in front of him. "This was the game Touya played."

"Eh? Oh!" Waya's expression did a one-eighty as they crowded around the empty table.

Isumi was stunned. From Waya's face, it appeared the other boy was in a similar state of disbelief.

"I can't even tell which side he was - they're both excellent players." Waya confessed, after spending a couple minutes following the game.

"White, I'm fairly certain." Isumi answered, not only because he remembered the directions they were sitting, but also because Black's style was simply too curious to be Touya.

"Who was Black, then?"

Isumi thought on the mysterious blonde girl accompanying him. He shrugged. "I have no idea."

Why - TAEYEON □□

Chapter 4: Why - TAEYEON □□

Track 6:

Solo (ft. Hoody)

Jay Park

Sai finally believed her when they touched down in Seoul, looking dazed by his first plane ride. Hikaru was not nearly enthused, glumly curled up in a window seat, watching clouds roll past them without really seeing them. He marvels at how high up they are, and how fast this giant bird can go. He spent the entire duration of their stay in the airport bouncing around the windows like a small child, enamored with all the planes landing and taking off.

True to her manager's word there was a car waiting for her in the Arrivals section. It turns out she really needed it, too.

Bright lights flashed in her face, and she reared back in shock, not prepared for them at all. She had to fumble for her sunglasses, putting them on like armor as she wove her way through the crowd and into the SM town car. It hadn't been all that long since she left, and yet she was still taken by complete surprise to see so many fans waiting for her at the airport. How did they even know she would be there? Japan was starting to feel like nothing but a strange dream - only the ghost babbling on beside her convinced her it was real at all.

Coming back to Seoul didn't feel like coming home at all. If anything she was already exhausted, and the day hadn't even started yet.

Saying goodbye to Touya was both hard and easy. It wasn't as if they were *really* that far, or like technology didn't exist and they weren't

just a text away. But it all felt very final, as if they both knew that it would never be the same.

Hikaru shook her head, clearing her thoughts. It wouldn't do to dwell in him for too long; being maudlin was never a good look in this industry.

Thinking about stuff like that was pointless. She needed to be looking to the future; she slipped her phone out of her pocket, scrolling through her calendar. Today was fairly light, but tomorrow it looked like she'd be booked solid.

She probably wouldn't even have any time to think about Touya, anyway.

"And one, two - step - and three, four -

Dance practice felt like hours today.

Hikaru was exhausted, but that was better than the alternative - which was moping about feeling sad for herself for no reason. Things were looking up for fx (not to say they weren't already good) with a new album, Hikaru's new streaming mini album, Krystal's TV show, Amber's show... it was getting a little overwhelming, actually. She'd thought she was prepared for this.

She was handling it pretty well, though.

Sai, on the other hand...

" *Hikaru is such a good dancer!* " He said, amazed, when her practice ended. Sai seemed in awe of the life on a idol - even more than he had in Japan. He was quite overwhelmed. He didn't understand why so many people were always trying to talk to her. Hikaru wondered what he'd think of an actual concert. Best to ease him slowly on that one.

Hikaru gave him an unimpressed look. " *That was a first run .*" She wasn't even going to pretend like that wasn't awful. Learning new moves and then trying to put them to the test in sync with all the other members was always a bad look.

Sai shook his head. " *Yes, but you're still quite talented !*"

" *Why do you say that?* " Hikaru asked idly, as she returned to packing up her stuff.

" *You can always tell how graceful a dancer is by their feet - at least, that is how it was all those years ago, and I don't think it's changed now.*"

Hikaru blinked. " *Oh.*"

Then she shook her head. " *Well, anyway, practice is done for the day. Do you want to play Go?*"

Sai stole a critical look her way. " *Do you?*" He countered. " *Maybe you should rest for a bit - you've been going from one appointment to the next nonstop.*"

" *Nah - if I went home now I'd just sit around and feel maudlin. It's better to keep moving.* " Hikaru denied.

Sai's look turned even more critical. "If you say so..."

She waved goodbye to her groupmates, hedging off plans for dinner by saying she'll text them later if she can make it. With Go games, you could never be sure how long they would last - and that was to say nothing of the after game discussion.

Hikaru had to spend a while looking up a nearby salon, and then another few minutes waiting for an uber. Walking or taking public transportation was an idea utterly doomed to fail what with being a K-pop star in Seoul.

The weather was too warm for a knit hat so she slung a baseball cap backwards on her head and a large pair of sunglasses, hopped into the car and hoped for the best.

It was only a five second jump from the car to the front of the salon, and Hikaru spent most of it slightly terrified. She spun around once she was safely inside, scrutinizing the streets outside for anyone taking photos. She sighed in relief. Sai stared at her, confused. She hadn't quite gotten around to the subject of fame in the age of the internet with him, and had no idea where to start.

"Excuse me, miss?" She whirled around frantically, only to sigh in relief when she saw it was only the girl behind the front counter, staring at her curiously but benignly. "Are you here for a game?"

"Yeah, I am." She breathed out, shoulders relaxing. "How much is the fee?"

She paid in cash so she didn't have to flash around a credit card with her name on it, and scrawled her name on the sign in sheet in the most illegible hangeul the world has ever seen. She left the rank blank - Akira had told her countless times she was at his level, if not higher, and there was no way she was going to put 7-dan.

With that over with, she peered around the room. She almost half expected to see Akira's familiar form, hovering over a table as he pleasantly explained a move to a dazzled audience of customers. Her lips twitched slightly at the thought, before they fell again when she remembered there was no way he would be here.

When she looked around the room, she was unsurprised to see the amount of older men idling about. She supposed she may as well just choose the friendliest looking of the lot.

" *Oh, look, Hikaru !*" Sai pointed wildly to the far corner, in an effort to raise her spirits. " *There's a cute boy your age over there! Why don't we play him?* "

But Hikaru didn't give him more than a passing glance. " *It's okay, Sai, I'm not really in the mood to be chasing boys right now .*"

There was only one boy her age they both wanted to play, and unfortunately he was on the other side of Japan's sea.

Sai pouted, not satisfied by that answer in the least. "Please?" He insisted, beguiling. "He looks strong." That wasn't actually a lie; there was an intensity to his eyes that interested Sai.

Hikaru turned a reluctant look towards the boy in question, before finally she just sighed. "Sure, then."

He didn't look up, even when she was all but standing over him. She waited for a beat, until he finally looked up. What was with random Go players and looking like casual Idols? Just like Akira, this boy had the nicest cheek bones... Hikaru mentally digressed. But while Akira was charming and polite, this boy just gave her a severely annoyed look.

"Want to play?" She asked, smiling.

"No." He said curtly. "Go away."

Hikaru was taken aback by his rude response. If he didn't want to play, he didn't have to be such a jerk about it.

Making up her mind, Hikaru only narrowed her eyes, smile turning sharp. "That wasn't a question." She revealed, seating herself across from him even as he spared her a poisonous look.

She didn't even wait for him to say anything, grabbing a handful of white stones and giving him a frosty look that said, 'guess or die'. He must have gotten the message because he closed his kifu book with an irritated sigh, sitting up a little straighter as he dipped his hand into his own go ke.

Hikaru's eyes sparkled. She got black.

" You ready for this, Sai? " She said, feeling a spark of excitement. " You better beat him into the ground. "

" Now Hikaru, that's not very nice. " Sai sniffed, but he was smiling. " Still, how could he be so rude to a young lady? He better start taking you seriously."

" Exactly." Hikaru agreed, smirking.

" Well, let's start with the diagonal then."

Meanwhile Yeongha was already starting to curse himself for even agreeing at all.

The only reason he hadn't just closed his book and walked off was the spark in this girl's eyes. She looked just like all the others did; cute, trendy, and looking for a boyfriend. It was impressive how many times that happened to him, since he wasn't actually a k-pop star, despite whatever most people would assume. Normally the prospect of Baduk was enough to put off the most vapid of girls, but this girl had just waltzed right up and challenged him. They usually took the hint easily enough - but not this one.

He should have said no, but there was this intensity in her green eyes that made him a reluctant participant instead.

He wasn't sure what it was, but it looked like a promise.

Two hours later and Hikaru had never felt such satisfaction in her life.

His expression when he dropped his hand into his lap, and realized he had lost, was perhaps the best thing she'd seen all week. She didn't know much about Go, but she could tell it was a great game, just from the way he was breathing hard and the way Sai hid his expression behind his fan.

"I resign." He said, sounding as if he still hadn't gotten over the shock of it all.

"Thank you for the game," Hikaru quipped, before moving to pick up her bag. "Well, I've got to run. Do you want me to help clean it up?" *Or would you prefer to keep it here to study it*, was the unspoken second option.

He looked up sharply at that. "You're leaving?" He choked out in surprise.

Hikaru made a show of looking at her phone. "Yeah, I told my friends I would go to barbeque tonight."

"You..." He stared at her for a moment, as if gathering his thoughts. Then he shook his head. "How long do you have?"

"What?"

"Until your dinner," he repeated, sounding as if he was impatient but at least attempting not to look it. "How long?" Hikaru supposed it was the thought that counted.

"I have an hour," she allowed, after a beat.

"Then sit," he gestured to the seat she had just left. "I want to discuss the game with you."

She raised a cool brow. "Wow, that almost sounded polite."

"Please," he gritted out, looking pained.

Her expression was still one of amused surprise. " *Jeez Sai, what did you do to this guy?* "

Sai laughed merrily. " *His arrogance led him to a staggering defeat.* " He revealed, eyes sparkling. " *To be fair, Touya-kun had done the same to you - he too had been too soft in his opening hands, most likely because he didn't want to play a novice too severely.* "

Hikaru nodded mentally. She'd figured as much.

"This boy, however, probably just didn't want to give you the time of day." He smiled. "But he has seen the error of his ways."

And then there were two Sai fan boys, Hikaru thought, amused.

She sat back down. "Alright. Just for an hour." She conceded.

By the end of the hour Hikaru supposed she could forgive him for such a lackluster first impression; he confessed girls came up to him a lot to ask for a game, and the vast majority of them didn't even know how to nigiri. He'd grown wary of people he didn't know asking him for games. Hikaru could understand what it was like to have people you didn't know constantly wanting your attention, all the time, even when you were just too tired to handle it.

He was about as arrogant as she had assumed, but it was clear it was not unfounded. He was a very impressive player, Sai revealed. The ghost went on to add he wouldn't be surprised to find this boy was a professional too.

Hikaru decided she may as well ask. "Are you a professional?"

"Yes." He answered immediately, still frowning down at her brutal cut in the upper right. He shouldn't have let her do that, but he wasn't giving this game nearly the attention it deserved. It made his heart skip a beat - he'd never felt so invigorated after such a crushing defeat. He couldn't even *remember* the last time he'd lost so badly, to anyone.

"Are you?" He had to ask, even though he already knew the answer. This sort of talent - it wasn't the sort of thing he could ever overlook.

She shook her head, confirming his suspicions. "No." She didn't elaborate, even though Yeongha wanted to know everything about her; why wasn't she a professional, where did she come from, where did she learn how to play like this?

Her style was flawless, and the more he studied it, the more humbled he grew. Classical met modern and drew together to create a perfect mix of quiet cunning and ruthless efficiency; it was impossible to guess how she would approach the situation. Would she play a more antiquated hand and aim for a subtle cut, or would she go straight for the jugular with a pincer, the more contemporary answer? He shook his head. At any rate, she read straight through him, even from the very first opening hands.

He gave her a run for her money, at least. It wasn't as if he went down without a fight; the all out war in the upper right spoke to that.

He decided not to press the issue; tabling her reasons for foregoing professional Go for another time. Instead he returned to their discussion, gesturing to the war in question. "I don't know why I thought a ko fight would be a good idea here," he noted wryly.

It was enough to startle a laugh out of her.

"Yeah, trying to face me head on is never a good idea," she agreed. It wasn't arrogant however - it was an easy confidence that came from years of experience. Who was this girl? "I would have played the *hane* right here; this would force Black to block, and give you better momentum for the offensive."

Yeongha frowned. "It's not a bad idea," he allowed. "But it's certainly not the kind of move I would play."

"Too soft?" She smiled knowingly.

He scowled. "I suppose you could say that. I just don't think it has enough depth; I don't gain any territory out of this move."

"No, but you don't lose any either." She countered. "It's true it does nothing to challenge Black's current advantage, but it gives you stronger leverage in yose, and by forcing Black to answer, you can push the offensive on the next turn."

Well, when she put it like that, it didn't seem like a weak move at all.

Still, it wasn't the kind of move he'd ever entertain. But this was not a bad thing. If anything, he was pleased to hear such a sound argument against him. It was so rare for anyone to truly challenge his opinions like this. And beyond that, to make him stop and think about his moves and wonder if her way really *was* better.

That was probably a matter of style though, and while he could see her pulling it all off spectacularly, he'd probably have more trouble weaving such complex and subtle traps right from the opening hands.

Too soon her phone was ringing, and then she was taking a moment to respond. When she looked up, she smiled at him regretfully.

"Looks like I've got to go," she said, putting her phone down.

He nodded, staring at her closely. "Are you going to be back?"

"Here?" She blinked. Then she frowned. "I guess so." It was close enough to the studio, the office, and her dorm. That might not be a good thing though. "Are you usually here?"

"I come here often enough." He answered, vaguely.

"Oh," Hikaru blinked. "Well maybe I'll see you around some time then." She hedged.

"When will you be back?"

Hikaru wasn't sure what to say. "I'm not sure." She allowed. Her schedule was crazy enough as it is. "Do you want to exchange numbers?"

This would be the second time she'd gotten a boys number from Go, she thought with amusement, as they held their phones close enough to exchange data.

It wasn't until well after barbecue and catching up with the girls that she finally had a chance to talk with Sai alone. It was a good thing Amber slept like the dead, otherwise Hikaru wasn't sure how she'd explain away all this talking to herself.

"What did you think of him?" She asked idly, blinking up into a ceiling that should have looked familiar, but after so long away looked new and foreign.

" My first impression of him was not flattering, " Sai never minced words, did he? " However, by the end of it I actually think he's quite nice. Certainly talented. It's interesting how similar he and Touya-kun are, and yet how different they are as well. "

Then, he lamented loudly; *" And I hadn't realized how this language barrier would make after game discussions so difficult. "*

Hikaru readily agreed.

She'd had to do a lot of scrambling about, filling in blanks and hoping that she didn't sound like an absolute idiot. She had to take everything Yeongha said and then translate it as best she could for Sai, and then take Sai's answer and find a way to convey that in Korean. If this was what translators went through regularly, she really didn't pay them enough respect. Of course, discussing abstract plays and complex problems probably made it all the more difficult.

" Still though, not a bad first game in Korea."

" Not bad at all! " Sai enthused. "I t was brilliant! You sure have a way of picking them, Hikaru! "

"You picked him," Hikaru pointed out drily.

" Yes, but I picked him out for you." Sai countered.

Hikaru made a vague noise of agreement. *" So, how are Yeongha and Akira similar? Personality wise they couldn't be any different ."*

" *That's very true.* " Sai agreed vigorously.

But their play styles... both were fierce and powerful, rash in a way that spoke of a severe lack in adversity. And it manifested outwardly in such different ways; Touya was polite and withdrawn, and this Yeongha was arrogant and aloof. But those were both reactions to a life alone, without anyone else to share their passion and drive with. They were both too strong for others their age to handle, causing them to look towards the older generations.

" *They both are very offensive players.* " Sai explained, after brushing off his thoughts.

Hikaru laughed. " *Yeah - I guess I should have expected that .*"

" *I'm excited to play him again,*" Sai continued on, happily. " *I have a good feeling about this one.*"

I could always just call her, he thought miserably.

She was only a phone call away, but the distance felt endless.

Akira hadn't quite managed to even send a text message. It seemed a bit silly, anyway. What would be the point? He had nothing interesting to say, and he had no idea how one went about carrying on small talk through a phone - it was bad enough in real life.

It was fine professionally, but sitting in school trying to figure out what to talk about was the most trying thing in the world. He didn't have much in common with any of them, so finding things to hold conversation on was overly difficult.

At any rate, this was more or less the reason he kept to himself during school. He was polite enough to his peers, and everyone in his class certainly liked him - but there was an obvious distance between him and everyone else.

Akira stared out the window with a small frown furrowing his brow - the only indication he was feeling anything at all. Tokyo was sticky and wet. He wondered if Seoul was the same.

Unbeknownst to him, two girls were staring at him with identical looks of confusion and interest.

"Did you ever really notice him before, Shi-chan?" Rio asked casually, stealing another glance towards the boy a few rows behind them.

Shiharu didn't answer, already turning back to her lunch. "Hmm?"

"Touya Akira," Rio continued, lowering her voice secretively. "You know what I mean?"

"What about him?" With a rustle, Kurosawa Satsuki poked her head out from under the desk, unearthing a bento from her bag. "Is he the reason you guys have been eating lunch here recently?"

"No," Rio answered, at the same time Shiharu said, "Yes."

Satsuki blinked at them both.

"Well, we want to see you obviously," Rio was quick to add. "It's just... you know, he's in your class and all, so it's a little hard not to wonder."

Satsuki hummed thoughtfully, sliding the lid off her lunch. "I guess," she answered, noncommittally. "Why Touya-kun, though?"

Rio shrugged. "No one really knows much about him, right? I mean, he goes to our school but he's not in any clubs or anything and I rarely see him since we're not in the same class. I knew *of* him, of course - I guess he just hadn't crossed my mind."

Satsuki raised a brow. "Crossed your mind as a love interest?" She teased.

Rio laughed. "Definitely not." Then she winked. "Or at least - not *my* love interest."

"Rio has too many boys after her already," Shiharu giggled. "She doesn't need anymore to add to that."

Rio rounded on her, poking the blonde in the shoulder. "Don't even start that with me! How many gifts did you get on White day, huh?"

Shiharu blinked innocently. "Probably a lot less than Satsuki-chan."

Satsuki merely shrugged. She was the notorious ice queen of Kaio, so that was no surprise.

Then she blinked. "Wait. Then whose love interest is he?"

"That's what we're trying to figure out!"

The three girls looked up from their huddle of desks, Fujisaki Akari standing over them with a sly grin on her face.

She pulled another chair up to their makeshift lunch table, ripping into her melon bread. "So, is today the day we ask for a teaching game?"

"A teaching game?" Satsuki repeated, growing confused. "What's that?"

"Touya-kun is a professional Go player," Shiharu revealed.

"Well yes, I knew that but... you want to learn Go?" Satsuki asked, looking even more bewildered.

"No, no, no! Or well... I mean, yes, I do. But that's not what it's really about." Rio hedged vaguely.

Akari rolled her eyes. "We think my friend Hikaru likes him, so we're going to be nosey and figure out what's going on with them." She explained, succinctly.

"Ah." Satsuki nodded solemnly in understanding. "But of course."

"You should join us, Satsuki-chan!" Shiharu added, grinning. "The more the merrier, right?"

Satsuki made a noncommittal noise, twirling a long, shiny curl around her finger as she leaned back. "I don't know. Would it cut into my shopping time?"

"It won't be everyday," Rio assured.

"And Touya-kun is probably very busy with his job, so he won't have all that much time to teach us." Akari pointed out.

Satsuki shrugged. "Well, why not." She may as well. "Maybe we should ask Mizuki-chan and Reina-chan -

Akari shook her head furiously. "No, we can't! This is a secret between us, okay?"

Satsuki's brow furrowed. "The go lessons?"

"Well, no," Akari hedged, before continuing after a bite of her melon bread, "People can know about that. But the reason for it is a secret! No one can know that Hikaru likes him!"

"Why?" Satsuki tilted her head, frowning. "Does she have a boyfriend already or something?"

Shiharu shook her head, smiling behind her onigiri. "Noo," she drawled, all but beaming. "She's an idol."

Satsuki gasped. "No way! What kind? What group?"

"A Korean idol," Rio added excitedly, leaning closer. "Isn't that so cool? She's part of fx!"

Satsuki blinked. "Did she just release a new mini album?"

Rio nodded. "That's the one!"

The other girl's eyes went very wide as she looked towards the three of them. Then, like clockwork, her gaze snapped over to the boy across the classroom.

"Now I see why you're so interested in him," Satsuki commented, after a beat.

And then she surprised them all by standing up abruptly.

Rio looked up at her, blinking. "Satsuki-chan...?"

Without another word the brunette pivoted smartly on one foot and determinedly cut her way across the classroom. She came to a stop right in front of Touya, pulling out the chair from the desk in front of him and plopping into it. The sparse students loitering in the room grew quiet at the spectacle, but their voices were too low to carry.

Touya looked surprised and vaguely uncomfortable, but Satsuki wasn't the most liked girl in the school for no reason. She could be very charming and set people at ease quickly.

She returned to them triumphantly, the three girls looking up at her expectantly.

"He said yes," she revealed smugly.

"Of course he did," Rio laughed. "When has anyone been able to resist you?"

It's not as if Akira doesn't like them. He just doesn't understand them. They're very nice, although they tend to get off topic quickly and don't seem all *that* serious about learning Go. Akira can at least give them credit for trying, though.

Shiharu is the quietest, and also the nicest. It takes her a bit to understand things, but she doesn't give up. She's also very patient. Akira isn't sure how she and Rio are best friends, because Rio is the loudest and most impatient person he's ever met. That's not to say she's not nice - although she definitely has no trouble being rude. Akari reminds him a lot of Hikaru, so he can see how they're such good friends. She has that same easy-going confidence; but she has nothing on Satsuki. However, despite the brunette's vanity and inherent narcissism, Akira can see why people like her so much.

He's never known teenage girls to show interest in Go - or at least ones that aren't already in the Go club - so he doesn't really understand why they would even bother to learn, but it's not as if he has anything better to do during his lunch period.

He's starting to think the Kaio Go club is getting mad at him for 'poaching members' though.

He's teaching Akari tsumego when she asked, casually, "So Touya-kun, have you talked to Hikaru?"

Akira paused mid move, staring up at her like a deer caught in headlights. "Err - no?"

Akari frowned. "Do you not have her phone number?"

Akira shook his head rapidly. "No, no, I do."

The girl was staring at him patiently, clearly waiting for an elaboration. He put the stone back in the go ke. "I wouldn't want to bother her," he replied, lamely, "She seems very busy."

"I'm sure she wouldn't mind." Akari rolled her eyes.

"Yeah, she might be super busy but she always makes time for her friends." Shiharu piped in jovially, waving her phone. "She always replies to me on snapchat."

"Yeah, she followed me back on twitter!" Rio enthused, looking equally as excited.

"You should talk to her!" Akari said, and Akira wondered how the conversation got so far away from him. "Oh, here," she dug around in her pocket until she finds her phone.

She turned around so she can get them all in the picture, holding up a peace sign. "See? Smile!" She put her phone down, typing furiously. "I'll send it to Hikaru and tell her you say hi."

Akira just nodded silently, at a loss for words. They continued on like nothing happened, Satsuki fortunately reminding them all that they're supposed to be learning Go right now.

All in all, it's not a bad way to spend lunch. It's certainly more interesting than his usual quiet time reading a new book.

Still though, he can't help but notice how easily they all talk to Hikaru. The distance doesn't seem to phase them at all. They retweet each other (whatever that means) and send her snapchats (whatever that means) and photos and videos of sleeping cats without any apparent effort at all. And they don't ever seem to talk about anything interesting. Aside from stickers, the only thing she and Akari have talked about was her new album released online, and a magazine cover she'll be on next month.

Maybe it really is that easy.

Track 7:

Shut Up & Groove

Heize x DEAN

"Hikaru," Krystal called from the living room, just as Hikaru was attempting not to burn the whole complex down in the kitchen.

"What is it?" She shouted back, turning off the stove.

"Your phone's ringing!"

"Huh?"

She hopped out of the kitchen and scrambled over the couch to roll to where her phone was charging. Krystal just spared her an impressed glance at the acrobatics. Hikaru ignored her when she saw who was calling, eyes widening.

"Akira-kun?" She greeted in surprise.

There was an offbeat pause. "Shin - Hikaru-chan," he greeted back. "Sorry to call out of the blue - is this a bad time?"

Hikaru sat up a bit straighter, still in a state of surprise. "N - no, not at all." Krystal was watching her curiously, unable to understand the Japanese.

"How are you?" She continued, after recovering from her shock. "How's everything going?"

"I'm well - everything's going... good, I suppose."

"You suppose?" She repeated, cheekily.

"No, it really is going well," Akira amended. "I'm still in the Kisei main tournament, and I just qualified for the Judan main tournament."

Hikaru leapt to her feet. "Oh! That's great!" She smiled wildly. "Congratulations!"

He laughed uneasily. "Thanks..."

Hikaru frowned then, excitement deflating. "You don't sound all that thrilled." She pointed out.

"I am, really." He promised. "But it's just..." There was another long moment of pause. "Ogata Seiji is the current Judan."

Hikaru blinked. "Oh?" She asked, blankly. "Is that a good thing? Or a bad thing?"

"I suppose it's neither." Akira said, after a beat. "I lost to him in the Honinbo main tournament - he's one of my father's students."

The Meijin's student? Hikaru thought. Sai made an impressed face.

"At any rate, he played a game in the Oza tournament. I was hoping you'd seen it - I wanted to discuss it with you, but when I thought about it further I realized you probably don't have the time for that." He ended sheepishly.

"Not at all!" Hikaru was quick to reassure. "Well, I mean, you're right I didn't see it, but I don't mind talking about it." She laughed. " *After* I've seen it, of course."

"Right." Akira agreed, sounding amused and a bit relieved. "I don't think the kifu is online yet - you don't happen to be by a goban, do you?"

Hikaru bit her lip. They definitely did not have one of those in the dorm. She really needed to get around to buying one of those. She spied her superstars tossed haphazardly by the front door, an idea clicking in her head.

"No, but I can be." Depending on how fast she ran. "Can you give me five minutes?"

"Sure." He said.

"Alright, call you back in five!" She hung up, grabbing her phone - charging cord and all - as she ran for her jacket.

"Hikaru? Where are you going?" Krystal asked with surprise.

"Uh, I'm going out really quickly." She hedged, struggling to pull the hood of her sweatshirt over the collar of her jacket.

"Right now?" Krystal blinked. "Huh?"

"I'll be back soon." She promised, running to the front door to slip on her sneakers.

"You just made dinner." Krystal pointed out, blankly.

"Yeah, what do you want me to do about this food?" Amber popped her head out of the kitchen.

Hikaru shrugged. "Eat it, save it for me, either or."

"Really?" Amber looked excited. "You don't mind?"

"Eat to your heart's content!" She assured, much to Amber's delight. She'd definitely make good on that request.

She wrenched the door open, taking off into the light drizzle.

It was probably more than five minutes to sprint her way to the go salon, but it was infinitely faster than trying to take a cab. It never ceased to amaze her how it could take half an hour to crawl through one city block's worth of traffic, and take her not even two minutes to run it on foot.

She was only slightly out of breath by the time she was pulling off her hood and shaking out her damp hair, not wasting any time paying the front desk and picking out a table.

When she'd finally gotten to an open one in the back corner, she called Akira back.

"Sorry about that!" She greeted cheerfully, not sounding like she'd just ran here in the slightest. "Alright - who went first?"

"Ogata-sensei's opponent was Nogi-sensei, the current title holder of the Gosei title. He opened on the upper left 3-3..."

Despite being hundreds of miles away from each other, Hikaru knew they were both looking at the exact same board. At any rate it didn't make much sense to her, but Sai 'ooh-ed' and 'ahh-ed' at appropriate intervals so she did the same. She knew it was a very good game when Sai started floating around upside down by the ceiling.

" *Both these players are formidable adversaries for Touya-kun,*" Sai commented, after they'd made it to the end of the game. It was close, but Ogata had ultimately broken through to end the game with a 1 point lead.

Hikaru nodded silently.

" *Well, what do you think?* " Hikaru prodded, after a beat. " *I'm assuming Akira-kun thinks you'll have some great pearls of wisdom if he went through all this effort for your opinion .*"

" *Me? Wisdom?* " Sai laughed. " *But yes I suppose I do have a comment or two .*"

"... Hikaru-chan?"

Hikaru started out of her thoughts. "Sorry. I was just... thinking."

"This fight here in the center... White plays an unexpected trap and Black falls right into it. But White's following offending moves are a bit careless; no surprise Black escaped it. Nogi-sensei has the vital point in the following moves, presumably Ogata-sensei overlooked it. Black is forced to defend his cutting point; close quarter fighting will follow and this is clearly better for White."

Hikaru pauses. "Nogi-sensei surrounds a large territory although it seems extravagant." She tilted her head. "Almost as if he made this move above the center in a somewhat a unclear frame of mind,

appalled - or simply making up for - his absentmindedness in letting Black off the hook."

It's Touya's turn to be silent.

"... You read a lot from the board," he noted after a beat, sounding surprised and perhaps a bit sheepish.

Hikaru blinked, before shaking her head. "Huh?"

"Nogi-sensei and Ogata-sensei have a very peculiar animosity between each other," Touya explained, offhand. "It's no surprise they goad each other into making poor moves that neither would otherwise play."

" *That would indeed explain a lot,*" Sai concurred, from where he was listening in next to her. " *The fight in the center in particular seemed a bit reckless - perhaps not so much in intention as in execution .*"

Hikaru hummed. "But you're facing Ogata-sensei, right?"

"Well, no, not exactly," Touya hedged. "I'm in the main tournament, which means there is a chance I will. If I somehow make it out of it I'd have to play him for the title, that is."

Hikaru giggled. "You don't think you can make it through the main tournament?"

"Even I'm not that cavalier." He joked.

Hikaru shook her head. "Well, don't sell yourself short either!"

Touya didn't seem entirely convinced, making a noncommittal noise before returning to the subject at hand, "At any rate, Nogi-Gosei is in the Judan main tournament as well, and I've never played him before so I'll have to look carefully at his kifu."

"But you've played Ogata-sensei a lot, right?" Hikaru asked, curiously.

He said he was in his father's study group, after all.

For some reason, she felt annoyed at the thought. She was immediately surprised at herself; of course Touya plays other people aside from her for fun. They only met a month ago, surely he had to play others? It was nothing to be annoyed about. But irrational or not, the idea of Touya playing non-official games with other people didn't sit well with her.

"Not particularly," Touya replied, slowly. "Our last match was during the Honinbo tournament."

Ah. Hikaru shifted her weight uneasily. Touya didn't seem to like to be reminded of that particular defeat. Hikaru wondered why - it wasn't a game to be ashamed of. Sai said he actually played very well; although he'd also called it recklessly angry, so maybe that was why he didn't talk about it much.

Hikaru looked down at her recreated board.... Maybe Ogata-sensei just had that effect on a lot of people.

"Well, Nogi-sensei is no pushover either, despite the loss." She continued on, "I can see why he's a title holder. He has a rhythmic flow in his games, like a fast-running river; never still and never going backwards. His subtle use of *amashi* strategy is particularly splendid here when he's playing White."

"He reminds me of you, actually." Touya returned, quietly.

Hikaru blinked, blushing. "H-he does?"

He means Sai of course, she corrected herself. *Hikaru* didn't have a style.

"He's known to have a style similar to that of Honinbo Shuwa -

" *Of course*," Sai exclaimed, surprise. " *Tsuchiya-sensei!* "

"-whose pupils included Shusaku and the Honinbo's who came after, Shuetsu, Shugen and Shuei."

" *His sons*, " Sai's lips curled into a slight, sad smile. Hikaru glanced at him with worry. It

Sai shook his head. " *Touya-kun is correct. Honinbo Shuwa was Torajiro's teacher.*" He stared down at Hikaru, his smile turning softer, perhaps even nostalgic. " *If Hikaru-chan is my reincarnation, then Nogi-Gosei would be Shuwa's .*"

"Well I'm flattered to be compared to the current Gosei title holder," Hikaru answered diplomatically, "But I still have a lot to learn before I can consider myself even with Nogi-sensei - or Honinbo Shuwa, for that matter."

Sai looked at her oddly at that. It was as if the girl had stolen the words right out of his head. That's exactly how Sai - how *Shusaku* - would have answered.

"You don't need to be modest, Shindou," Touya replied, amused.

"I'm not!" Hikaru protested hotly. "I'm certainly not arrogant enough to think I'm anywhere close to them."

"It's not arrogance if it's true," Touya pointed out.

Hikaru found herself blushing a bit. "That's absolutely not -

"He's right, you know."

Hikaru leapt straight out of her chair with a yelp, whirling around with a gracelessness unbecoming of a dancer. Yeongha was sitting at the table behind her, hands in the pocket of his sweatshirt, looking a surreal combination of amused and yet nonplussed.

"Y-You..." Hikaru sputtered. "How long have you been there?"

Predictably, Yeongha just shrugged.

Hikaru lifted the phone back to her ear from where it had all but flown out of her hand and landed on the table.

"Sorry about that, Akira-kun," Hikaru apologized hastily. "I was... startled."

"Are you alright?" Touya asked with concern.

"I'm perfectly fine," Hikaru answered, awkwardly. "Um... I think I have to go though. Sorry I couldn't be of more help."

"You were more than helpful enough, Shindou." Touya replied, warmly. "Thanks for your time."

"It's really no problem at all." Hikaru returned weakly, blushing and feeling flustered as she said her goodbyes and hung up.

Then she turned to Yeongha, accusing. "You can speak Japanese?" It was less of a question and more of a demand.

Yeongha shrugged again. "My mother is Japanese," he explained, drily.

So this whole time, she didn't have to be stuck playing translator?

It would have saved me a great deal of trouble to know that earlier, you jerk. Hikaru thought, uncharitably. "Why didn't you say something earlier?"

"You never asked," Yeongha returned, as he got out of his chair to meander closer to her board. "And anyway," he continued offhand, as he got up to examine the board. "I'm not as fluent in it as I am in Korean."

Oh. Hikaru crossed her arms, still feeling miffed.

"Who were you talking to?" He asked idly, one hand drawing up to trail his finger across the stones.

Hikaru narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "A friend of mine from back home." She answered, vaguely.

Yeongha made a noise of interest. "And they play Baduk? What game is this?"

"Ogata-Juudan versus Nogi-Gosei in the Oza main tournament."

Yeongha made a noise of distaste. "You only follow the Japanese league, don't you?"

Hikaru frowned. "I don't really follow any, actually." She revealed. "He wanted to discuss it so we recreated it. I wouldn't have known otherwise."

"You don't follow the professional leagues at all?" Yeongha asked, looking appalled. He shook his head with a click of his tongue. "One of these days I'm going to bring you to a match. That's a travesty."

That would be a PR nightmare, Hikaru thought, uneasily. Outwardly she just smiled evasively.

"Why? Are the styles very different in the Korean league?" She asked with genuine interest.

"We're better, of course." He replied with a smirk.

Hikaru rolled her eyes. "Oh yes, I'm *sure* ." She agreed sarcastically, thankful they were speaking in Korean lest she hear the brunt of Sai's protests to that particular comment.

Yeongha either ignored her sarcasm or was totally oblivious to it, his attention once more fixated on the board. "Well since it's here, do you want to discuss it?"

"Oh, you're telling me a Japanese game isn't *totally* beneath you?"

Yeongha scowled. "Well I didn't say *that*..." He hedged, crossing his arms.

Hikaru laughed.

"Well then, what do you think of it?" She gestured to the board.

Yeongha's scowl lessened somewhat as he stared down at it. By the time he'd brought up a chair to get a closer look, it was gone entirely, replaced by an intense look of profound focus.

Hikaru shook her head, smiling slightly. It was almost funny, how his personality totally changed whenever he was in front of a Go board.

As the night continued - and Hikaru eventually dragged Yeongha away for food because she'd skipped dinner and was starving at this point - Hikaru decided she actually liked Yeongha. He was mean and prickly and moody, but that was part of what made him so interesting. That, combined with his pure and passionate fervor for Go, made him into a really fascinating person.

A perfect person for a song, she realized, the thought striking her like a bolt of lightning.

Yeongha looked up from his japchae. "What?"

Hikaru was staring at him with big, wide eyes. Then she shook her head furiously, looking back down at her own noodles. "Nothing," she said, quickly.

Yeongha narrowed his eyes, frowning.

"I was just thinking... you're really weird." She revealed with a light-hearted laugh. Yeongha's frown deepened. "I just mean - you're surprising, I guess."

"It's nice." She offered after a beat, smiling slightly.

Yeongha wasn't entirely sure what to say. Thanks seemed a little too pedantic, but he didn't know what else was applicable. It sounded like a compliment, sort of.

"You're even weirder." He said instead, which was true.

Hikaru was very strange. He guessed he could see her point. She was weird, but it was nice.

Hikaru flat out refused to play or discuss or do anything related to Go after dinner, insisting she needed to get home. That wasn't untrue; they had a grueling dance practice early tomorrow morning, that wouldn't end till the afternoon. It was for fx's next single, which wouldn't be released until fall. It wasn't as if she could tell Yeongha that though, so she just said she had something to do early tomorrow morning and needed to get going. The boy begrudgingly agreed, but only after he made Hikaru promise to play him again sometime next week.

Hikaru went home and went straight to her notebook, hoping she wouldn't lose her inspiration so soon.

Sai peered over her shoulder, looking curious at the hangeul. " *What are you writing, Hikaru-chan?* "

" *A song* ." She replied, tapping her nose with the end of her pencil as she thought of what to write.

Sai nodded; he'd heard music before, of course, even during the Heian period. He would admit the music Hikaru listened to and made sounded nothing like what he remembered, but he at least understood the concept. Writing songs was a lot like writing poetry, and Sai knew from experience how difficult that was, so he left her to it.

Hikaru frowned down at her paper, brow furrowed in concentration. Her manager said to write about real experiences - but he'd also said love songs sell the best, and Hikaru had no current love interests. But she had to come up with something, so she closed her eyes and thought of Yeongha, staring at her with a nonplussed expression as he rudely pointed at her with his chopsticks; Yeongha looking up at

her with an angry, defiant expression when she refused to leave him alone.

It's been said before, love is one moment,

That surprising start when you meet by chance...

□□ (HANGANG) - Hoody (□□)

Chapter 5: □□ (HANGANG) - Hoody (□□)

Track 8:

Night

Taeyeon □□

Akira placed down the final stone, replaying a game that he had memorized like the back of his hand. Sometimes it was reassuring to see this game coming back to life, even if Shindou wasn't here to put her stones down for herself. It had been months, but still the game was just as exhilarating now as it had been when they'd played it. Akira sighed, shaking his head. She had been right - if he had played this game any other way, he would have been frustrated with himself, doubting every move and wondering if it was too hasty or too reckless, or made with emotion and not with clarity.

At least this way he knew he had given this game his very best, no distractions.

He couldn't help but wonder if any of Shindou's moves were reckless. Had she played differently, knowing she was leaving? It didn't seem like it - she played as strong and calm as she always had. And yet, she'd burst into tears at the end of it. He shook his head, somewhat amazed by that. How could she stay that strong, even under intense emotional pressure? That was definitely something he needed to work on; Ogata had got into his head that fateful game, and he had all but opened the door for him. Akira had a bad habit of playing with his whole self; often times that meant his emotions leading him away from his normal, calculative state. Other times that unbridled passion tended to be his best asset.

"Akira-kun," he was startled out of his thoughts by Ichikawa's voice. "I'm just about ready to leave here. Do you want a ride home?"

He looked at the clock, realizing it was far later than he had thought.

He nodded quickly. "Yes, just let me clean this up." He called back, as he began to pick up the stones.

Ichikawa was in a wonderful mood on the way home - apparently she has a date tonight, or something. Akira didn't really get it, but he's happy for her nonetheless. He could do without all the loud singing and louder music, though. But it's apparently Ichikawa's favorite song.

He sighed, leaning back in his chair as he stares out the open window, listening to the open wind and Ichikawa's slightly off-pitch voice singing along to the radio.

He knew it, of course. It was a little hard *not* to when it was playing in every grocery store and convenience mart, on TV, on the bus home, and on every radio station - including whichever one his mother listens to in the kitchen.

It was... fine. It sounded like pop music, as far as he was concerned. He wouldn't have paid it any attention, sinking a little lower in his seat as his eyes slipped shut, when suddenly the song faded out and the station announcer took its place;

" Hope everyone's enjoying their Friday afternoon - that was Cy's hit single 'Why' - up next we've got more from her hit mini album, and your weekend weather report after the break - "

Akira blinked, sitting up further. Cy?

"Ichikawa-san," he began, quickly. "What song was that?"

Ichikawa blinked at him. "The pop song?" She clarified, looking surprised with him. To be fair, Akira was equally as surprised with

himself. "That's Cy. She's pretty popular."

He nodded faintly, eyes very wide. "Oh." He said, faintly, as he looked blankly out the window.

That was Shindou? It all felt a little surreal.

Sure, he *knew* she was an idol, he knew she was on TV and the internet and the radio, but it hadn't really hit him what that meant until now. She was *famous*. Ichikawa knew her song by heart. They were playing it on every radio station. It was the 'number one song of the summer', the announcer said, once the commercials were over.

He didn't really know what to think, feeling an even greater distance between them than usual. She was a pop star.

He shook his head, belatedly listening in to her next song playing on the radio, from the same album, or so the radio host said. Apparently Ichikawa knew her whole album by heart, because she had no trouble singing along with this one, either.

It didn't even sound like her! Well to be fair, he'd never actually heard her sing, so he wouldn't really know. He was having a hard time connecting the girl he knew to the girl on the radio, though.

He gave a half-hearted farewell to Ichikawa as she dropped him off, still lost in thought. He hoped the girl was doing okay. They texted fairly often - or rather, Hikaru tended to text him random things at random times, and sometimes Akira replied to them. Most of the time they didn't really warrant much of a reply, but it was reassuring to know what she was up to nonetheless.

She hadn't said anything about a new album, though.

"Eh? Of course I knew!" Akari remarked with surprise, when he asked her about it after the weekend. "They announced it ages ago!"

Akira blinked. Clearly whatever news sources Akari followed were drastically different from the ones he followed.

"It's... really popular, huh?" He said, weakly.

Rio looked at him like he'd grown two heads. "Well, yeah." She agreed, deadpan. "Cy's a big deal, you know. Well, if you follow k-pop she is. But now she's got an album in Japan, so of course they're going to be marketing it."

"I think it's a great idea," Satsuki agreed with fervor, all but leaning over him to talk to Rio. "Most k-pop entertainment studios don't have much of a foothold here in Japan, so capitalizing on the fact Cy's from here and already has a Japanese fanbase was inevitable for them."

In all honesty, he doesn't really care that much about k-pop. But he does care about Hikaru, so he's at least somewhat interested in the current topic of conversation. Still he wished he hadn't brought it up - knowing these four girls, they would be talking about this *all* lunch.

It's not as if he didn't like them, but they had a way of being there *all the time*. He never actively sought them out - they just sort of... tended to appear out of nowhere. And apparently having this much of Kurosawa Satsuki's attention was a dangerous thing in Kaio, so they had moved their lunch sessions to the roof. At any rate, all this just meant that he spent a lot of time with these four girls during school, so he was well versed in their favorite topics of conversation. K-pop was definitely one of them. He mentally sighed. Maybe one of these days they'd actually get around to Go; as of now, he could at least be take comfort in the fact they all knew what *Atari* meant.

"Would that make her a j-pop star then?" Shiharu wondered aloud.

Rio shook her head adamantly. "No way! She's still a part of fx, and they're a k-pop group!"

"Yeah, but she released a Japanese album." Satsuki disagreed. "And she's got that contract with Uniqlo! Wouldn't that make her a j-pop star?"

Akira rubbed his temples. He felt like these disputes were getting more and more bizarre as it progressed. Hikaru was famous. Wasn't that the end of it?

Akari made a thoughtful noise, waiting to finish her mouthful of tamago before adding in; "She's got a contract with Topshop too - does that make her a - a... b-pop star?" Akari frowned. "Whatever. You know what I mean - she's not a British pop star just because she has stuff in Britain."

"Exactly," Rio nodded readily. "Krystal and Amber are from LA, but they're still considered *Korean* stars."

"Yeah, but they're also Korean." Satsuki rolled her eyes.

"I wish I hadn't brought it up," Shiharu lamented, too quiet for the arguing trio to hear. She turned to him with a small smile. "Is it weird, to you?"

Akira blinked. "Is what weird?"

"Having a famous friend." Shiharu elaborated. "Seeing them in the news and stuff like that."

He paused for a moment before answering. "I hadn't really noticed until I heard her song on the radio," he confessed. "It was certainly... surprising."

Especially because he didn't know her as a pop star. He knew her as a *Go player*. One of the best, if not *the* best, player that he knew. As it turned out, the whole world knew her as Cy, the idol, and Akira was the only one who knew her as a Go player.

He frowned. How could that be? There had to be others. She was so talented - surely there were others she'd played before him.

She held the stones like a beginner, he recalled from that day all those months ago when she'd first came up to him and asked for a game out of the blue. She held them between her fingers like he did, but he could still tell from how she placed them on the board that she wasn't used to doing it. But she hadn't played like a beginner.

Shindou was confusing. Her life as a celebrity only made her more confusing.

She wasn't making it up - she really was an idol. Every media outlet around him was proof enough of that. She wasn't making up being a Go player though, either. He had many games that could attest to that.

Maybe this bewildering and impossible contradiction was reality. Shindou was both a pop star, and perhaps the greatest Go player to ever live. That might be an exaggeration, but she was still far too good for a pop star, of all things.

Akira sighed loudly.

Shiharu gave him a worried look. "She's still your friend," the girl added, gently, mistaking his despondent expression for sadness as opposed to resigned bewilderment. "It doesn't matter if she's an idol or not."

"You're right," Akira agreed, smiling back at the girl. "She's still Shindou."

But that's the thing; who is Shindou?

For a person he'd only known for a handful of days, she had really left an impression on his life.

Hikaru released her very first solo album, to mixed but generally ecstatic reviews. She could have collapsed with relief; all the momentum leading up to the release had built up in her like a tea kettle with the lid still on it. It didn't help that she was running around everywhere exhausting herself trying to promote her own album while promoting her group. It was received favorably overall, and that was the important thing to remember.

She didn't take the criticism to heart, anyway. Or well, maybe just a little. The critics complained her album was 'generic' and 'lacking in uniqueness', which, quite frankly, were criticisms that applied to the entire industry. As far as her management was concerned, they were very pleased with her 'generic' album; they didn't want interesting music, they wanted music that sells. And all her songs were trendy and on point with their listeners, so they could care less. Hikaru though was a little miffed. She actually wrote those songs herself! Well, she lamented, she had never considered herself a talented song writer.

For a first try, she decided it was a good job. The album was selling a lot; the Japanese release was really taking off. Maybe even more than the Korean release. The whole team went out for a lot of celebratory dinners, where everyone but Hikaru got joyously drunk. (The woes of being underage.)

It calmed down after the first two weeks her album had been out, and Hikaru was getting back into a routine. Or as much of a routine an idol could have when she was always traveling about for some reason or other. There was dance practice, always, singing lessons, acting lessons, game shows and talk shows (was there even a difference these days?) and news shows and advertisements and new endorsements. Sai utterly despaired for her, shocked by how much they could pack into her schedule every single day.

Now that it was finally over, she felt like she could take a breather for a day or two.

Or at least, she had wanted to.

Unfortunately there was another matter she had been neglecting in favor of her new album; one that was calling her right now.

Hikaru groaned aloud at the noise, flopping sideways on the couch to see who it was. She half hoped it was Akira.

He hadn't called her since that day, but they had texted a few times. Or rather, Hikaru texted him a lot of nonsense and sometimes he replied.

It wasn't Akira, though.

Hikaru frowned at her phone, feeling weirdly nervous when she realized Yeongha was calling.

She hadn't seen him since she'd wrote a song about him. Or a song sort of about him. By the time the writing team had gotten through with it, the whole thing had ended up less platonic and more romantic, but that wasn't surprising.

At any rate, all this just meant that there was no romance, despite the love song, so Hikaru had no reason to feel so anxious at the thought of seeing him.

Mind made up, she reached over to swipe it off the coffee table.

"Hey," She greeted, sounding about as tired as she felt right now.

"Hikaru," he retorted, sounding annoyed. "Where have you been? You haven't answered any of my calls for the past few weeks."

Hikaru grimaced at the accusatory tone. She knew he had called her, and she knew she should respond, but she didn't know what to say. She couldn't exactly tell him she was a little busy promoting her new album - and oh by the way, did I mention I was an idol?

"I... was busy." Hikaru replied weakly.

Yeongha made an annoyed noise. "Well, are you still busy, or do you have some free time?" He sounded a little less impatient by the end of it, because it was pretty obvious to hear how exhausted she sounded.

Hikaru gave a vague groan. "Yeah, I've got free time." She said with defeat. It was worth it though to see Sai's face light up with pure joy when he realized he would be playing Go soon after their long hiatus.

She got up, stretching with a contented yawn. "Where should I meet you? The usual?"

"I'm at a different salon," Yeongha replied. "I can text you the address if it's easier."

Hikaru frowned. "Sure." Interesting.

Yeongha hated any changes to his routine - and location was definitely one of his biggest peeves. He had some odd attachment to their regular salon, one Hikaru didn't even bother to try to figure out. It wasn't the nicest salon she'd been to, but it was clean and usually not crowded, and the rotating staff manning the front counter were always very nice.

The reason for the change in routine became clear enough when Hikaru arrived at his location.

Yeongha wasn't alone.

Hikaru's brow rose. *Very* interesting.

Yeongha had said himself he disliked most people, and especially people around his age, so it was no surprise Hikaru was so shocked to see him accompanied by someone - someone younger than him, no less.

The boy couldn't be any older than thirteen or fourteen, wearing a school uniform for one of the private academies around here. He had on a serious expression that would be better suited for someone twice his age. He was hunched over the board, staring at it intensely. Then he lurched forward, retorting something Yeongha said with a surprising vehemence. Hikaru raised a brow.

Hikaru made her way over, finding herself very curious over the boy.

The two Go players didn't notice her, too busy arguing with each other. Well, it appeared Yeongha's ill-tempered grouchiness didn't just apply to her. He had no trouble rudely interrupting and shouting at this boy too. She crept closer, peeking over the other boy's shoulder to get a better look at the board. Sai made an approving noise.

" Is he good?"

" Hmm... he's quite talented," Sai concurred. " But he has a long road ahead of him. He's young yet though, so he'll grow into someone worth watching."

Hikaru blinked. *" So, not as good as Yeongha?"*

Sai laughed. *" Hikaru, " he began gently. " The majority of the people you'll play will never be as good as Yeongha-kun - or Touya-kun, for that matter."*

Hikaru frowned. *" Yeongha and Akira-kun are really that good?"*

" They are both at a level far above what their youth would belie. I'm sure they give the top pros a run for their money."

" Huh." Hikaru knew they were good, but she supposed she hadn't realized the scale of it all.

After all, they were the only two people she'd ever actually played - the rest of her experience with Go came from recreating other

people's games, and a couple times playing other people in different salons.

" *They're both such fun to play! Being able to play them and watch them grow into their potential has truly been a gift.* " Sai clapped his hands cheerfully.

Hikaru smiled a little at that. Sai was so easy to please; all he wanted was to play Go, and help others play Go to the best of their ability. He really took so much joy in seeing Yeongha and Akira flourish as players. Her smile disappeared a little at that; she should really try to give him new opponents to play. He might vastly enjoy the two, but surely it got boring playing the same person over and over again?

"What do you think, Hikaru?"

She was ripped out of her thoughts by Yeongha's dry voice, blinking rapidly. She stared at him, surprised and yet unsurprised to realize he'd known she was there the whole time. He was point down to the board, at a single white stone.

Hikaru didn't reply at first.

"It's..." She hesitated. "It's really quite awful. It leaves the entire territory open for Black's cut. Black would only have to play at 13-17, and with a single *degiri* would take control of the whole territory."

She glanced up at Yeongha. "Assuming, of course, such an inelegant move isn't beneath you."

Yeongha smirked. "What about this *hane* instead?"

"The *hane* works perfectly fine; in this instance, the *degiri* would have worked better."

"Awful?!" The boy beneath her erupted, spinning around in his seat. "Do you even know what you're saying? A crude push and cut like

that would -

He went still, eyes widening when he caught sight of Hikaru. He was so surprised he completely forgot what he was saying, mouth opening and closing without anything coming out.

"Would what?" Yeongha filled in impatiently, after a few seconds of silence had come and gone.

His younger companion did not respond, staring at Hikaru in a way that meant he'd recognized her, but didn't believe it was true.

"Suyeong," Yeongha said, irritated.

Suyeong did not answer him. He didn't even look his way, actually. Finally the boy swallowed, and seemed to gather enough presence of mind to say;

"You..." He sputtered, gaping. "You're -

Hikaru mentally sighed in resignation. "Hi, I'm Shindou Hikaru," she interrupted, putting on her best smile. "I don't think we've met before."

"Hikaru, this is Hong Suyeong. He's a 2-dan." Yeongha introduced offhand. He gave Suyeong a marked look, as if he was wondering why Hikaru had made such an impression on the boy when they'd only just met. Maybe he thought she was cute? Not untrue, but that would be new for Suyeong, though. Yeongha was fairly sure he still thought girls had cooties.

"Suyeong, don't argue with her." He continued, "If Hikaru says it's the way to play, it's probably the way to play." He ended imperiously, and Hikaru wasn't sure if she was flattered or annoyed.

"That's not true at all," Hikaru protested. "There are dozens of ways to approach this scenario; the *degiri* is just the option I would chose."

Yeongha rolled his eyes. "I suppose there are different styles to consider."

Hikaru didn't even bother to continue the argument, peering over the board again. "I'm surprised you didn't go for it. Brash offensive moves seem right up your alley."

"I'm surprised you *did* . It's very unlike you." Yeongha retorted with a raised brow, crossing his arms.

She sighed, shaking her head. "I think you're rubbing off on me."

Suyeong was still in a state of shock, staring up at her.

She looked down at him with a smile. He flushed to his roots. Then he looked back at Yeongha, blurting out, "You just called her *Hikaru* !"

Yeongha frowned. "So?" Sure, it was remarkably impolite to call her by her first name without any kind of honorific, but Suyeong had known Yeongha long enough to not even bat an eyelash at that sort of attitude.

He looked between them wildly. "You... You- but she's- " Then he turned back to Hikaru. "You're Cy, right?" He said, voice high with disbelief. "Like, the idol?"

"Idol?" Yeongha repeated, bewildered. "What are you talking about?"

Suyeong rounded on him. "You don't know?" He balked, looking equally bewildered. He looked back at Hikaru, who grimaced sheepishly. "She - she's Cy! Like, you know, from *fx* !"

"What's *fx* ?" Yeongha repeated, confused.

Suyeong's eyes were as wide as saucers. "The girl group? *You've never heard of them?* "

Yeongha scowled. "I don't listen to that crap."

Suyeong's gaze whipped back to her, as if expecting her to protest this. Hikaru shrugged; fair enough. There were a lot of people who thought pop music was awful - she was not surprised in the least to find Yeongha was one of them.

"She... She's an idol." Suyeong stuttered out, after a beat of stunned silence.

Yeongha blinked, annoyed expression turning into one of pure, unabashed surprise. It was a rare look for the normally composed and calculative pro. He blinked, and then his expression melted into pensive contemplation. He studied Hikaru with careful eyes. Hikaru wasn't sure what to say.

"Is that true?" Yeongha asked, tone inscrutable.

Hikaru swallowed with difficulty. "Well... yes."

She wasn't sure what to make of him. His features were impossible to read, eyes appraising, mouth thinned into a fine line. She was sure that analytical mind was rifling through his thoughts at the speed of light, but for the life of her she couldn't figure out what conclusion he'd drawn.

Yeongha seemed to study her for a moment longer, before shrugging it off. "Well, whatever."

Hikaru gaped at him. Suyeong copied her.

"You could be in the circus for all I care," Yeongha continued, drily. "As long as you're still playing Go with me, I could really care less."

Hikaru blinked at him. It was her turn to look completely floored.

"Oh." She said, stupidly. Well if she had known that before, everything would have been so much easier.

Yeongha gestured to the chair next to him, completely unfazed by recent revelations. "We're just cleaning up here. Then we'll play." He

turned a sly smirk towards Suyeong. "I told Suyeong to play you too, but he said he was 'too good' to play an amateur."

Suyeong blushed furiously.

Hikaru waved it off, laughing and still far too relieved with the lack of theatrics. "Well, I'd love a game if you change your mind."

Suyeong and Yeongha began clearing the board, as Hikaru and Yeongha continued their conversation on his previous play. Suyeong stayed silent, still looking like he was in awe of Hikaru's general existence. Or maybe just her existence in this unassuming Go salon. Afterwards she and Suyeong switched places so she could sit opposite of Yeongha to play. He settled in a chair pulled up next to the table, where he continued to stare at her as if he couldn't believe she was going to play a game with Yeongha. In his defense, Hikaru would be equally as bewildered if she was in his position.

Hikaru ended up with black, Yeongha with white.

Yeongha was watching her impatiently with hungry eyes, eager to see Shusaku's Fuseki once again. Hikaru didn't deny him, opening at the upper left at 4-4. He took the adjacent point, as Hikaru played 3-4 at the bottom right. His eyes gleamed, in anticipation.

" I wonder what he has in store for me?" Sai murmured, opening his fan. *" He's quite eager for me to play the kosumi."*

Hikaru mentally frowned. *" Are you going to do it?"* Yeongha wouldn't be excited for no reason; he definitely had something planned.

" Oh, absolutely." Sai enthused, to her surprise. *" I can't wait to see what he has planned. "*

Hikaru played the Kosumi.

Suyeong looked at the girl - looked at Cy - once more, still confused, but this time his confusion stemmed from the game, not the girl

herself. What an odd opening. Shusaku's opening was so rarely used these days, mainly because its prominent strength decreased with the advent of komi. It was certainly not a common opening, and yet Yeongha was clearly waiting for it. She must use it a lot, then.

Suyeong found himself staring at her again, and snapped his gaze back to the board, blushing slightly.

It was just... that was Cy! How was this even possible? It was too bizarre even for a dream.

Cy and Yeongha were friends. Cy and Yeongha play Baduk together. *Cy played Baduk*. He still couldn't wrap his head around that. This really was Cy. Or Cy-noona, as his classmates would call her. He could admit he was... a bit of a fan. Okay, a big fan. But all the boys his age liked girls in girl groups so that was no surprise there. And *fx* was certainly the most popular of the lot. Personally his favorite was Kyrstal, but he liked them all. And Cy was certainly very pretty. A lot prettier in person, actually. Even dressed casually she looked like an idol. Her skin was so flawless; her nails had little sparkles on them just like all the trendy girls at school; her hair, despite being tossed up in a messy ponytail, looked soft and silky. She didn't have any crazy fashion on, or jewelry, or even makeup, but it was still hard to take his eyes off her.

He made a serious effort to tear his mind away from the girl and back to the game. It was turning out to be something worth watching - living up to Yeongha's words. The older pro had told him she was a good opponent, but Suyeong had dismissed him. He didn't even entertain the thought of playing someone who wasn't even a *yeon'gusaeng*, let alone a pro. He just thought Yeongha had finally gotten a girlfriend or something.

Suyeong blinked, sitting straighter in his chair.

Wait. Was she his girlfriend?

His eyes near bulged out of his head. He turned to Yeongha, who was of course completely ignoring him, engrossed in the game. Hell, he called her *Hikaru*. Her first name! And she didn't even bat an eyelash. And it sure seemed like they had hung out before... Suyeong swallowed. Everything about their demeanor and interactions spoke of a casual comfortableness. Maybe they *were* dating.

Meanwhile, Hikaru was thinking something similar.

Well, she obviously knew they weren't dating, but it had occurred to her halfway through this game that... that would be a pretty obvious conclusion for someone to come to. Someone oblivious to their relationship, like Suyeong, would probably come to that conclusion first.

Which, well, wasn't true *at all*, but that's not what it would look like to the press, now would it?

Her management would have a field day. PR would wring her neck and give her sad eyes for months. The press would probably ruin their friendship forever - and if not them, then all the people who would start trying to take photos of Yeongha and find out everything about him would. She would never wish that fate on anyone. Especially over a misunderstanding.

Actually, management would probably love this, she thought, resigned. She'd just released an album, one marketed as authentic and written by her, even though the writing team ended up slashing out most of her lyrics. People would probably eat that up. Cy wrote a song about a real boy- and that boy was Ko Yeongha. They'd probably be fine with it, as long as she didn't actually start dating him. That was absolutely, strictly, one-hundred percent not allowed for idols.

Hikaru mentally vowed to try to avoid that scenario at all costs. It wasn't fair to involuntarily drag unsuspecting people into the chaotic anarchy of an idol's life.

" *Oh-ho!* " Sai chortled, a hand to his mouth.

Hikaru blinked out of her thoughts. " *What?* " She looked down at the board, and actually focused on it.

Sai shook his head. " *I didn't expect him to play the peep there, instead of falling for my trap and playing the hane .*" He explained, amused. " *Why, I do believe I'm rubbing off on him.* "

" *Is that something you would do ?*"

" *Yes. I would never have fallen for that trap .*" Sai said, proudly but without any arrogance.

Suyeong waited with baited breath, wondering if Yeongha would see the trap. He let it out when the older pro dismissed the trap to play the peep in the top corner. He could see why Yeongha liked to play her so much. She was just so... calm. Unmoving, and completely unflappable to anything Yeongha dished out. She had gained the lead early on and it looked as if she would carefully nurture it to the end. And if Yeongha didn't come up with something to derail that, she really would win.

But what could he do? Suyeong frowned. Her style was calm, but not slow or peaceful by any means. Her constant forward momentum was surpassed only by her impressive ability to read ahead. It was almost as if she had read through the entire game already. That was just impossible though, no one could have such a deep, sharp reading. And it wasn't as if her lead was mind blowing or anything. This was undeniably a close game from the start, with lots of small fights and no big moyos.

Suyeong held his breath when Yeongha was forced to take time off of their fight in the top left to fend her off with a move at 9-3. He had to, though, otherwise he would have no prospects to speak of.

Cy was ruthless in her offensive- unhurried, but merciless nonetheless.

His next move at 6-7 was a good shape, but a few hands later she played a forcing move far in the top corner, building up moyo on the left side.

She was... amazing.

She was going head-to-head with Yeongha- she might even be winning, actually. Suyeong hadn't had the time to properly read ahead and count territory, but he knew it would be close. She was well worth the consideration Yeongha gave her, that was for sure.

Idol or no, she was an astounding *Baduk* player.

"- And I never travel without my missha essence mist! Sometimes, when I'm in really dry places like airplanes or even just backstage under those lights, I'll spray it around to give my skin a midday boost- "

Suyeong was embarrassed for himself for watching this, but mostly he was just bewildered.

He still couldn't come to terms with the fact he was sitting here watching some silly k-beauty video on youtube starring k-pop star Cy, who incidentally also happened to be, in his personal opinion, one of the best *Baduk* players of their generation. He palmed his face, wondering if he was dreaming.

Nope, not dreaming.

On his phone's screen, a bubbly blonde with perfect skin and a bouncy ponytail continued to narrate her ungodly long skincare process. Her on-air persona tended to be bubbly and energetic, and he couldn't help but compare it to the girl in person. Hikaru was not nearly as bubbly or over the top in real life, but she wasn't timid or shy in the least. She also had no trouble going toe-to-toe with Yeongha in an argument, as he found out later that day when the game had finished and they'd moved onwards to the after-game

discussion. If anything, she was... pretty normal. Aside from the whole Baduk-genius thing she had going on. Suyeong *still* didn't know what to think of that.

It seemed so surreal. He wanted to message all his friends about it, but the moment he opened the Line app something made him pause.

Suyeong was a fan of hers, of course. He liked k-pop, and he had a variety of groups he followed on social media and fan sites. But aside from buying the occasional merchandise and going to concerts with his friends, he wouldn't consider himself a die-hard fan. And then there was Yeongha, who could care less about that sort of stuff. Not everyone was like that though. His friend Junseo could be a little *too* into it sometimes, camping out in front of recording studios or entertainment buildings for hours just to get a glimpse of his favorite star. He could only imagine what would happen if the world found out that Cy played Baduk- her fans would probably stake out every Baduk parlor in the city. It would be awful. Yeongha would be livid; so would Suyeong. He could only imagine how irritating it would be.

And if *he* thought it was irritating, he had no idea how Cy would feel about it.

A part of him felt almost... protective of her, almost.

He was included in an incredible secret, and he didn't want to ruin it. Cy and Yeongha played Baduk together, with some level of regularity. Fortunately the clientele that frequented the shops they did had little to no interest in all this 'hip new k-pop hype', so Cy and Yeongha could play together in peace. Cy said she'd even play him, the next time they met up! It was an opportunity of a lifetime, and not just because she was one of his favorite idols; she was a fantastic player, and he'd want to play her regardless of her fame.

But there was another part of him that wondered just how long they could keep this secret up. Cy had just released a new solo album after all, which was a pretty big deal, and fx was set to tour starting in

spring. Not only would her schedule become too chaotic for regular games, she would probably be too famous to get away with it.

Track 9.

We Are (ft. Gray & Loco)

Woo Won Jae

Just like her departure, Hikaru's return to Japan was sudden and mostly unannounced.

She didn't really have time to tell anyone, not even Krystal or any of the girls, let alone Yeongha. He was going to be so pissed, she lamented. There was nothing he hated more than missing one of their Baduk dates, and Hikaru had been begging off of them more often than not lately. It was just... the life of an idol was stressful and chaotic. Case in point; Hikaru is currently on a redeye to Tokyo when she was supposed to be at an event in Busan with the rest of fx . Her travel itinerary was hastily thrown together at the last minute, she barely caught a flight out and almost couldn't get a hotel booked, and she still didn't know who was doing her hair and makeup tomorrow morning- hell, she still didn't even know how long she would be in Japan for.

Apparently one of the popstars for a popular charity ball got sick and had to drop out of the lineup, and the only one the fans wanted to see take her place was Hikaru. It was flattering, if not bewildering. She'd never encountered this level of fame before. It was one thing to be popular in Korea, and a whole other story to start getting popular outside of it. She couldn't imagine how it would change her life. She almost didn't want to; she's heard horror stories about *sasaengs* from other entertainers in the industry, and she was sure she didn't want to have to deal with that herself. With her trajectory though, it was almost inevitable.

It was as they were pulling up into Tokyo Midtown that she stared down forlornly at her phone, wondering if she should tell Akira she was in town. The driver opened the door for her, and even though the sun wasn't even up yet there were at least a half dozen photographers waiting for her. She checked into the hotel easily enough, collapsing onto her bed in an exhausted sprawl, phone still in hand.

It wasn't that she didn't want to tell him- she just didn't know if she should say anything if there was no chance of them meeting up anyhow. For all she knew, she was catching the first flight out after the concert to meet back up with the group.

She chanced a glance to the quiet ghost at her side.

She wanted to reach out to him, if only for Sai's sake. It was getting harder and harder to escape to play games for him- especially in Korea. She was too scared to go to random parlors now, with her new album out and everything. More and more people were starting to notice her wherever she went, sometimes even following her around. Sai might reassure her up and down that only playing Yeongha and Suyeong was fine, but Hikaru still felt bad. Even if they were both professionals, and both obviously very good, surely he wanted to play more people?

With a determined expression, Hikaru reached out to her manager's assistant to get her full schedule mailed to her. After scrutinizing it carefully, she decided she had *just* enough time to make it, if she could get out of the concert the moment it was over.

"It's favoritism, is what it is." Waya insisted crossly, slurping his noodles.

Across from him, Nase sighed. "Could you stop going on about this?" She complained, exasperated. Waya had been whining about the unfairness of all this Hokuto Cup business ever since they

stepped foot in the ramen shop, and didn't seem to be losing steam as the day wore on.

"It's just not fair!" The redhead scowled. "Why does Touya get to be seeded like that, while the rest of us have to fight to prove ourselves?"

"Maybe because he's already facing higher dans and getting into league tournaments?" Isumi suggested drily, digging into his own bowl of ramen.

This of course was the last thing Waya wanted to hear. "He's only a 3-dan! Just because he's gotten lucky a few times doesn't make him that much better than us."

Nase sighed. At this point, it was probably a lost cause to even bother arguing with him. Waya could complain all he liked, but until he beat the go prodigy in an official match, it was all just talk. Nase could see where he was coming from, still being an insei herself and all- it was hard to watch someone her age (or younger, technically) skyrocket to the top like that, even if it was Touya Akira, and everyone had always assumed he'd do that straight from the beginning. But Waya, Ochi, Isumi, and Saeki were all professionals now, so at least they had that going for them. Nase wished she could be in that position, looking forward with such energy, feeling nothing but excitement at the thought of taking on higher dans.

"Not for very long," Isumi pointed out. "Under the new system, he'll be a... 7-dan, I think?"

This of course only makes Waya scowl further. "Well, whatever." He scoffs. "I'll just have to play through the Hokuto preliminaries and win. Then we'll see who's really good enough to be first board."

Nase smiled sheepishly at that; it must be nice, to have so much confidence like that.

"You're facing Ochi next, right?" Isumi asked, causing Waya to straighten up at the mention of his rival.

"Yes," Waya agreed, steely eyed. It was clearly a game he didn't intend to lose.

Isumi smiled slightly at the sight. Nothing riled Waya up quite like Ochi could- not even Touya Akira and his 'insufferable attitude' (Waya's words, because Isumi had never seen the boy be anything but unfailingly polite) could stir up such a passionate response from the red-headed 2-dan.

Of course, Isumi couldn't fault him- he was often times the same when it came to Le Ping, the Chinese player whom Isumi considered his own rival. He always made sure to keep an eye on the Chinese leagues and Le Ping's scores- when the other boy was doing well, it only fueled Isumi's desire to be just as good. Even without him them being in such frequent contact as Waya and Ochi, Le Ping's very existence was often enough to spur Isumi forward. Isumi didn't think it was an exaggeration to say Le Ping was the reason he was able to pass the pro exam with straight wins, and even go on to beat Kuwabara-sensei in his beginner dan game; if he hadn't gone to China and met his rival, he more than likely would never have found the passion to rekindle his love for go.

Nase nudged Waya playfully with an elbow. "You better not lose to your rival this time!"

"Of course I won't!" Waya assured, irritated. "I can't let that punk get ahead of me. I have to be better."

Nase and Isumi shared a sly grin. All thoughts about Touya Akira and the Hokuto Cup seeding were long gone from Waya's thoughts. Nase was about to ask about Isumi's opponent in the Meijin preliminaries, when something over Isumi's shoulder caught her eye.

The girl lit up, smiling brightly. "Oh, it's Cy-chan!" She exclaimed, with delight. "She's my favorite idol. Oh, I had no idea she was in

Japan right now- I would have bought tickets for her concert!"

Waya gave the screen a curious look. On screen a blonde girl was singing and dancing in some kind of live event. She was exceptionally pretty, but not any more or less than any other idol he had ever seen.

He shrugged. "They're all the same to me." Although that had never stopped him from listening to the music anyway. Secretly.

"Cy-chan is the coolest." Nase insisted. "She's the bold and energetic member, but she's also very insightful and relatable. I bought her entire Japanese album."

Waya gave her a bored look in response.

Nase rolled her eyes.

When Waya turned back around, Isumi seemed to be heaving his way through a choking fit.

"Isumi?" Waya blinked. "Are you okay?"

Isumi waved him off, coughing loudly. He reached for his water, guzzling half the glass before coming up for air again. "Ah- sorry. A piece of food went down the wrong way." He lied, after a beat.

Nase and Waya took it at face value, Waya directing the conversation onto sports- a topic that Nase found as dull as Waya found k-pop. Isumi darted another look behind him to the television. He couldn't believe his eyes. Speaking of rivals, that was really her! That was the same girl that had walked into a Go salon with Touya Akira. It was impossible to miss- or rather, she was an impossible person to forget.

That looked like the Tokyo Stadium in the background, but it was hard to tell at this distance. He was fairly sure it was live coverage of the Toyota Charity Concert, not that he ever paid much attention to

that stuff. His little sister had been begging and whining to go all month though; he wondered if she had wanted to go to see Cy. That was her name, right? The pop star on screen, that apparently knew Touya Akira. Maybe even knew him very well.

He could easily remember Touya's expression when the girl burst into tears. It had looked like an uncomfortably intimate moment; he couldn't help but speculate on the situation. From the go board he saw after they left, he could only assume she was his rival. That level of play couldn't warrant anything less.

Isumi's gaze returned to Nase and Waya, already arguing over football teams, television, Ochi, and the Hokuto Cup long forgotten. Still though, he wondered if he should bring it up. He hadn't told Waya because he hadn't wanted the other pro to make a big scene at the time- it seemed rather odd to bring it up now. He chanced another glance at the screen behind him.

The Tokyo Charity Concert, huh? He thought, as he returned to his forgotten bowl of ramen. That must mean she was in Tokyo right now. He wondered if she and Touya were going to meet up then- the thought seemed so surreal. If he hadn't seen it with his own eyes, he wouldn't have believed it himself.

Isumi shook his head. Well, despite his curiosity, it really wasn't any of his business.

Hikaru skidded to a halt in front of a familiar office building, slightly out of breath. It was still the late afternoon but the sky was already dark at this time of year. Still though, she had certainly made it in time.

She couldn't believe she actually made it.

It had been a long shot, but she actually managed to pull it off. As she had suspected, after the concert ended she had to stay behind to meet some fans backstage, and sit for a brief interview on the

charity and take a few publicity photos. But afterwards she begged off, saying she was going to visit her grandfather since she was in town. Her manager wasn't pleased, but she had nothing on the schedule for tomorrow besides a plane ride back to Korea in the afternoon, so there was no reason not to let her go.

She did no such thing, of course. Instead she grabbed a cab and went straight to Touya's go salon.

Hikaru prayed he was actually here. She hadn't wanted to text him in case she couldn't make it, so she had no idea if he was busy or not.

She crossed her fingers as she pulled her jacket tighter around her, and ducked out of the cold and into the warmth of the building. Her heart seemed to beat out of her chest as she took the elevator up to the go salon, her breathing quick and uneven. She hadn't even been this nervous before taking the stage earlier, and that hadn't been a crowd to scoff at. Even Sai was surprisingly quiet as they waited. She entered the salon, barely paying any attention as she paid the entrance fee, too busy scanning the crowd.

Hikaru let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding, smiling in relief as she saw his familiar form in the back. He was turned away from her, addressing a pair of patrons in what appeared to be some light instruction.

The tension eased from her shoulders as she quickly made her way towards him.

Perhaps a bit too quickly.

"Oh- I'm so sorry!" She apologized profusely as she accidentally bumped into another patron.

The older man merely smiled at her benignly. "It's quite alright young miss, no harm done." He assured her, gesturing to his cup of tea that was perfectly unharmed.

Still though, it was really unlike her to be so clumsy. Dancer's reflexes, and all. She took a moment to compose herself.

"Were you here looking for a game?" The man asked curiously, as he sat down at one of the tables.

Hikaru blushed, caught off guard being put on the spot like this. "Um... err- well, yes, I am."

"Ah, well, I usually play with Kitajima-san, but he's not here right now. Are you free for a game?"

"Have you forgotten about me already, Hirose-san?" A low voice interrupted from behind her.

Hikaru spun around to see a man dressed in a rather flashy white suit striding towards them. Hikaru blinked at him, a little surprised to see someone pull off that outfit- and rather effectively, at that- in a Go salon of all places.

"Ogata-sensei!" Hirose-san greeted genially. "Of course not! But I can't just leave a lovely young lady waiting on a game like this, now can I?"

" *Ogata-sensei?*" Hikaru repeated in her head, surprised.

" *So this is the Ogata-sensei Touya-kun was talking about?*" Sai mirrored her surprise. " *I hadn't expected someone so...*"

" *Eccentric?*" Hikaru suggested with amusement. She didn't mean it in a bad way; she was still impressed by the white suit and red tie, if she was being honest.

" *Flashy... I was going to say.*" Sai replied, slowly.

" *I love it.*" Hikaru enthused, with relish. " *It's so glam. I want to pull that off- maybe I'll ask the costume department for an outfit like that on tour.*"

Sai laughed. " *Yes, I suppose it would fit in rather well in your strange and outrageous routine you call theater.*"

Hikaru didn't even take offense to that.

Predictably, the tall blond turned his attention towards Hikaru. The girl found it almost rather discomfiting to be on the receiving end of that scrutinizing stare.

He pushed his glasses up on his nose. "You're here for a game, then?"

He wouldn't have guessed it, from the look of her. She had on a modest dark jacket covering what looked to be some kind of sparkly dress, a pair of staggering heels, and wild, windswept hair. She was really rather pretty- but far too young, and definitely not his type.

"Well, actually I was looking for someone," Hikaru replied quickly.

"Oh, you are?" Hirose-san blinked, before smiling amiably. "Who is it? Between Ogata-sensei and I, we know just about everyone in here, so we can definitely help you find them."

"Thank you, but I think I've already-

"Hikaru-chan?"

She whirled around at the familiar voice, seeing Akira striding towards them. She smiled in relief. "Akira-kun!"

Akira-kun? Ogata blinked. Now that was new.

The young Touya looked stunned to see her there. "But you..." He started, looking dazed. Then he shook his head. "You didn't tell me you were in town!"

"It was spur of the moment," the girl replied sheepishly. "And I wanted to surprise you."

"Well, consider me surprised." Akira replied, sounding almost... teasing?

Ogata and Hirose exchanged looks.

"Would you like to play a game?" The young pro asked.

The girl nodded profusely. "Yes, please." And then, in an equally teasing manner; "I did come all this way, after all." She added, drily.

Akira just seemed amused. "Then by all means," he gestured to a table in the back.

Ogata and Hirose waited politely for the two to be at an adequate distance away before immediately exchanging yet another set of bewildered looks. After a beat of perplexed silence, Ogata shook his head and collapsed into the seat across from the other man.

"Who would have thought the young master would have such good taste!" Hirose crowed, as he opened up his go ke.

Ogata shook his head, still stunned at this turn of events. He couldn't exactly disagree with the long-time patron across from him; the girl was exceptionally pretty. "That was an excessive amount of glitter." He decided upon instead.

Hirose laughed. "From what I can tell from my daughter, it appears to be all the rage these days."

Ogata shook his head- he would never understand teenagers.

Still though, it was rather befuddling to see Akira of all people acting like a normal adolescent and getting a girlfriend. He wasn't sure if what he was feeling was relief or disappointment. After all, Akira was above such nonsense, displaying a maturity far beyond his years. And yet at the same time, this was perfectly normal behavior for someone his age, and it was nice to see him acting his age for once. Ogata chanced a glance in their direction; they were both smiling.

The Judan sighed. At the very least, Touya-sensei would be beyond pleased.

Meanwhile, Akira couldn't bring himself to stop staring at Shindou- as if he thought that if he took his eyes away for even a moment, she'd disappear.

They settled across from each other at a table by the windows, wasting no time in opening their go ke. It was the first time Akira really managed to get a good look at her. He blinked. "... Is that a star on your cheek?" He asked, blankly.

Hikaru looked startled, her hand flying to her face. Her fingers came back with quite a bit of glitter. She couldn't help but laugh- they ended the concert with glitter bombs going off on top of the crowd. She couldn't imagine how much ended up on her, or in her hair, for that matter.

"I probably look like a mess, don't I?" She laughed, sheepishly.

Not at all. Hikaru never looked like a mess, even covered in glitter, wearing the most ridiculous metallic outfit underneath her jacket.

"Where were you?" He couldn't help but ask, taking in her entire appearance. She was wearing a lot of makeup, had stars stickered to her cheeks, and an impressive amount of glitter in her hair and basically everywhere. That was to say nothing of the outfit; something small, sparkly, eye-catching and very befitting of a k-pop idol.

"Um- " She looked a bit embarrassed. "The... uh, Tokyo Charity Concert?"

Akira had never heard of it, but he could imagine it was a rather big event. He also couldn't imagine she was just yet another attendee in the crowd. "You were... *performing* in a concert?"

"Well, yes." She shrugged. "But nevermind that. I escaped from my managers just for this opportunity, so let's not waste it."

Escaped? He thought, blankly. Then he decided she had the right of it.

"Nigiri, then?"

I Know - 知 (Feat SUMIN)

I know it's supposed to take place in summer, but the Hokuto Cup will forever be in winter because I remember being so excited for the Hikaru no Go winter special on TV.

Chapter 6: Know - 知 (Feat. SUMIN) Primary (知の初級)

He wondered why constant losses to Shindou were not painful at all; if he had such consecutive losses in any of his matches, in any of the tournaments, he probably wouldn't have known what to do with himself. And if he kept continuously losing to one person like this... he couldn't even imagine how he would feel. Just the very idea of it sounded awful.

And yet, he had never managed to win against Shindou, and he couldn't be happier about it.

Even losing to his father- just as frequent of an event, if he was being honest- was somewhat painful. There was always the sting of disappointment, as if he felt measured somehow and always came up a bit short.

Maybe it was because Shindou didn't seem to have any expectations for him. She never seemed to want anything but a good game, as if she was delighted just to see him play his best. It helped of course that this particular loss of his wasn't in front of dozens of cameras and reporters and a smug title holder looking across the board at him.

Touya Akira looked down at the board in front of him, filled with the efforts of almost two hours worth of play. Black and white stones glittered like treasured memories; he would be sure to record this game as he did all their other ones, to pick apart endlessly at a later date. A game with Shindou was always a wellspring of knowledge;

they were probably the reason he had even made it so far in the Gosei league at all. In all his leagues, really.

Shindou had changed him.

And people knew it, too. Reporters had all sorts of comments on the change in his play style. He actually used her beloved kosumi once in the Kisei tournament and the reporter from Go Weekly almost flipped over on his head. In study groups, and against other professionals, people always made a remark or two about it- saying how unlike him it was to use this move over that one, how he was usually more forward from the opening hands, how his ability to read ahead had improved. All of that came from long hours pouring over his games with Shindou.

He looked down at the board between them, and smiled.

"I'm really glad you're here," he confessed, quietly- so quiet it was difficult to hear him, even though the parlor was mostly empty at this point.

Hikaru blinked in surprise. She smiled, hesitantly. "Me too." She said. Although Akira seemed... weirdly moved by it.

He seemed to think for a moment longer, before shaking his head. He looked up at her with a small smile. "I hadn't realized how much I needed this until this moment."

"Huh?"

The boy leaned back in his chair, sighing. "Tomorrow I'm challenging Zama-sensei for the Ouza Title-

"A *title* match?!" Hikaru gasped with delight, as did Sai.

"- and I was a little anxious, to be honest." He finished, sheepishly.

Hikaru just looked at him with understanding. "Well of course." She said, bluntly. "Who wouldn't be? It's a title match! Why didn't you tell

me you qualified? Is this your first one?"

He wasn't prepared for the bombardment of excited questioning, taking a moment to reply.

"I... sorry. It was rather sudden- and unexpected, if I'm being honest; I forgot to tell anyone, really." *And anyone whom he would tell already knew, anyway.* "Yes, it's my first time to challenge for a title. I'm in the main tournament for Kisei and Juudan, but I've never actually advanced farther than that."

" *Touya-kun is so impressive!* " Sai remarked with a wide smile. " *I'm so happy for him.* "

" *Yeah, it's amazing, isn't it?* " Hikaru agreed readily. She really was impressed; she hadn't realized how well she understood Go and the culture around it until this moment. It almost felt as if she was actually a Go player too.

"That's amazing, Akira-kun," Hikaru repeated aloud, grinning widely. "I'm rooting for you!"

"Would you?"

Hikaru blinked.

Akira looked away. Hikaru wondered if he was blushing- he looked a bit embarrassed. "Well, it's just... unfortunately you can't actually be there- spectators are not allowed at Title matches- but I guess just knowing that you're watching..."

Hikaru sat up a bit straighter, dots connecting in her head. "Of course I'll watch!" She assured, passionately. Then she paused. "Um. Although I'm not entirely sure how to."

Akira smiled sheepishly. "That's a good point." He admitted. "I know they'll have a real-time recreation at the Go Institute, but I'm not sure how they get that..."

"The Go Institute?" Hikaru echoed aloud. She'd never actually been before. "Sure, okay. Where is it?"

He looked surprised she actually agreed. "It's off of the Ichigaya station."

Ichigaya... Hikaru pursed her lips thoughtfully. If she took the Namboku line from her hotel it wouldn't be that far. That was, of course, assuming it was even a good idea to take public transportation at all. Hikaru hadn't run into any trouble getting to the salon, but she had also taken a taxi from the concert and wasn't actually out and about for more than a few minutes. Maybe she would just play it safe and get the hotel to call her a cab.

"Ichigaya station, got it." She nodded, making up her mind. "What time?" She had that flight to catch in the afternoon, but that was out of Haneda Airport so it wasn't nearly as far as Narita.

"The game is set to start at nine," he answered, looking conflicted. "But I'm sure your schedule is already difficult enough as it is... I know it's a selfish request, so please don't feel obligated to go."

Hikaru merely waved him off. "Of course I'll watch! It's really no trouble at all." She insisted with a big smile. "In fact, I'm rather excited."

He ducked his head, looking vaguely embarrassed.

"Depending on how long it goes, I may have to leave before it's over," she moped. "But at least I'm leaving out of Haneda, so I don't have to leave as early as I would if it was Narita."

"Anything is fine, really." He protested, feeling his cheeks flush. He certainly didn't want her to feel *obligated*. "If you can't make it for whatever reason it's really no issue."

"Akira-kun," she huffed. "We're friends, aren't we? I'll be there!" She insisted, knowingly manipulating him with that to stop him from being

so stupidly guilty. Honestly. Boys were so silly sometimes.

"Akira-kun?" Another voice called, from the front of the shop. "I'm going to be heading out soon. Can you close and lock the doors on your way out?"

Hikaru blinked, looking around. She realized that they were the only ones left here- when had that happened?

"Yes, of course." Akira was quick to reply, rising from his seat. He gave her a sheepish look. "Sorry for keeping you so long. You must be exhausted."

Well, she was, but all the same it hadn't hit her until this moment. Suddenly the plane ride, the concert, and the hours between rammed into her like a freight train. She resisted a yawn, rising to her feet as well.

"Yeah, I should probably head back to my hotel before my manager wonders where I am." She agreed, about to rub at her eyes before remembering her stage makeup and thinking better of it. Oh hell, getting all this off was going to be such a pain.

"And... about my match tomorrow-

"I'm going, and you can't stop me." She cut him off, succinctly.

Akira gave a long sigh, but didn't put up much protest. Instead, he merely nodded. "... Thanks."

Hikaru beamed at him. "Of course!"

Today was shaping up to be a rather eventful day.

After all, it wasn't everyday that one of her peers challenged for a title. Although, calling Touya Akira her 'peer' was a bit of a stretch; all the same, at the age of sixteen it was quite impressive. No matter

how much grumbling Waya made over the Hokuto Cup roster, it was really no surprise Touya was already chosen as first board. No one else came close to that level of skill. And it wasn't as if this was the only league Touya was in, either. He'd made it to the main league in a bunch of tournaments already; he was even in a few currently, if she recalled correctly. All the same it was a *title* series, not just an ordinary main league match- although let it not be said that was easy to get into either.

They had all decided to head to the Go Institute to watch and discuss the game, and they certainly weren't alone in that. This was a game many people were closely watching.

In the Go world and beyond, apparently.

Nase spared the girl by her side another impressed glance, before quickly ducking her head as the other girl's eyes slid to her.

It was just... it was really rare to see someone so well dressed in the Go Institute. Nase considered herself rather moderate for a girl her age; still fashionable, but not particularly trendy, and conservative enough for the Go Institute. It's not as if the girl next to her was particularly flashy or anything, she was just- exceptionally well dressed. Nase was almost drooling over her handbag, and that was to say nothing of those boots. Were those Stuart Weitzman?

The elevator door slid open; the girl smiled at her briefly as they both stepped out, catching her eye.

"Sorry to bother, but are you familiar with this building?" She asked, with a charming grin.

She was so cute Nase found herself blushing. "Um- yes! Yes, I am. Were you looking for something in particular?"

"Well, I wanted to watch a game," the girl started, looking sheepish. "I heard it would be recreated here?"

"A game?" Nase repeated, blankly.

"Yes- the Ouza title match?"

Her jaw almost dropped.

She had expected the girl to be someone's daughter or granddaughter, or maybe just someone looking for the shop or the Institute's salon. She certainly hadn't expected this.

This girl... was going to watch Touya Akira's match too?

"Oh," Nase managed to say, caught off guard and embarrassed for herself because of it. Anyone is allowed to watch Go, if they want to- she hated it when people judged her by how she looked, so she really shouldn't be doing it to others. With that thought, she straightened up and offered a professional smile. "Well, I'm Nase Asumi- just call me Asumi, though. I was actually on my way to watch the recreation of that game as well, if you want to go together?"

"Is that really alright... Asumi-chan?" The blonde girl asked, looking a mixture of hopeful and relieved.

"Of course!"

"Great, you're a real lifesaver!" She let out a long breath. "I'm Shindou Hikaru, by the way. But Hikaru is fine."

"So, Hikaru-chan, are you an insei?" Nase asked curiously as they started to walk.

"Insei? Huh- oh, no. I um... I just like Go." She replied, caught off by the question.

She probably should have expected it, though. People were bound to ask questions about why some total outsider would be intruding in what is usually a very insular community. She turned a nervous glance towards Sai, who gave her a helpless look in return.

What was she supposed to say, though? Maybe it would be better to just leave it up to interpretation.

"Oh." Fortunately, Asumi didn't ask any questions. "Well, that's really great. We'll probably be discussing the game as we recreate it, if you'd like to join."

Hikaru just nodded, feeling caught left-footed in a way she usually didn't. Normally she wouldn't bat an eyelash in commenting on a Go game- Sai always had something insightful to say and it seemed like such a waste not to say it- but she didn't know how she felt about doing it now, with people she had never met before...

Was she really getting nervous? Whatever for? She hadn't even been nervous performing last night!

But she knew the audience, then. They were her fans, or at least, fans of pop music. Hikaru knew how to act in front of them. As for a bunch of Go obsessed kids, she had handled Yeongha and Suyeong well enough. This was different though, and she couldn't figure out why.

"Touya-kun is so incredible, isn't he?" Asumi interrupted her thoughts, smiling. "To think he's our age and already playing in a title match!"

"Yeah, he's really something." Hikaru agreed. "It's crazy to think he's so young."

"He's going to be in the Hokuto Cup too, if you've been following that." Asumi revealed, slyly. "Some of the other young professionals were a bit put out by that, but honestly I don't know what they were expecting to happen. He's seriously the best in our generation in Japan, maybe the whole world- why wouldn't he be hand selected?"

Hikaru wasn't sure what to say. "I... err, yeah that makes sense. He has a lot of experience in high stress games."

Asumi nodded along. "That's what I'm saying! Ugh, but my friend Waya- it's ridiculous. You'd think Touya-kun was the antichrist or something. They're just jealous though- you know how boys are. *Everything* has to be a competition." She rolled her eyes. "Like, can't they just respect each other's abilities and leave it at that?"

"That would be too logical for boys." Hikaru agreed empathetically.

Asumi's eyes lit up. "Right? Finally, someone who gets it!" She threw her hands up. "This whole place is filled with just boys. It can grate on a girl after a while."

Yeah, Hikaru could imagine. She loved her guy friends, but she certainly needed her girl friends too. There were just some things that only another girl could understand.

Asumi led her down a corridor, coming to a halt at a nondescript door. She opened it without fanfare, revealing, to Hikaru's surprise, a whole bunch of kids around their age. After playing in many Go salons both here and in Seoul, Hikaru had been expecting to see people a bit older. Or even way older. At any rate it's a pleasant surprise so she doesn't remark on it.

"Hi guys! It hasn't started yet has it?"

"Not so loud, Nase." A redheaded boy complained, from where he was putting stones down.

"You're late." A short boy with glasses greeted, crisply.

Asumi rolled her eyes. "Well, sorry that *some* of us have to take public transportation and don't have a private driver to tote us around."

The short boy didn't take any offense to that, although he did huff and cross his arms, looking up from the game.

His eyes widened a bit when he noticed Nase wasn't alone. Hikaru watched him nervously, just realizing the impact of being with her peers. If these were the usual older men that played Go, she would have assumed her identity as a pop star would go unnoticed. But since these kids were all around her age, there was a distinct possibility they could recognize her.

Ochi recognized his staring as impolite, and made a valiant effort to distract himself with the game laid out in front of him. He didn't encounter girls all that often- these days he didn't really consider Nase a 'girl'- and certainly not one this pretty.

Isumi near choked when Nase opened the door, walking in with the girl Isumi had come to learn was actually an international pop sensation. In person, he could see she definitely lived up to her reputation. She had a kind of glowing aura that could only be cultivated after years of practice in front of a camera.

He made a valiant effort to mask his flabbergasted surprise.

"Everyone, this is my friend Hikaru-chan, she wanted to see the match too." Nase announced, quick to break up the stunned silence.

Hikaru dipped her head quickly. "Nice to meet you all. Thanks for letting me join." If she was uncomfortable, it was impossible to tell. Impeccable stage training, Isumi thought.

"It's nice to meet you, Hikaru-san." Isumi quickly replied in turn, as his other pros floundered to get a response out.

"So, has it started yet?" Nase clapped her hands as she knelt by the goban, Hikaru following her.

"They've just played the opening moves." Ochi informed, pushing up his glasses. "Touya's playing spectacularly slowly."

"It seems reasonable that he'd be cautious." Isumi returned rationally, making a concerted effort not to give any undue attention

to the blonde newcomer.

He wondered what she'd say, though. Would she add her input? Or would she prefer to watch silently? Why was she even here, at all? To watch the game of course, Isumi reminded himself, feeling silly. He doubted the Oza tournament would be televised, and there was no real way to watch it otherwise. The only reason they could watch it was because the Go Institute received a live feed.

Isumi glanced at the girl, only to find her staring intensely at the TV pushed to the far corner of the room. There was no movement, the stones in the same positions they'd been in for the past five minutes.

"Is he ever going to run out of time?" Waya complained, sighing.

Nase nudged him. "He's *concentrating* !" She hissed at him. "You could learn a thing or two from him!"

Meanwhile, Hikaru found was actually finding it difficult to concentrate on the match at hand. She was so caught up in the novelty of being surrounded by a group of kids (roughly) around her age, all playing and discussing go, that she wasn't paying the television much attention. Hopefully Sai would do a better job of it.

She liked it. Sure, she got into discussions with Suyeong and Yeongha, but those were always about their own games. She'd never actually watched a match with them, the way one might a football game. Everyone had their own comments to add to the plays at hand, and their own style and approach that bled into their discussion.

The redhead- Waya- tended to take a more offensive position. He definitely liked to push the envelope, and he thought Touya was playing way too cautiously to gain any kind of advantage against Zama Ouza. Privately Sai agreed with him, although Sai didn't think Waya's approach would be too successful either.

The shorter one with the glasses, was surprisingly similar. His play style was actually quite a bit like Touya's, or so Sai said. Sharply aggressive when he could get away with it, but otherwise very taciturn. His argument was that Waya was an idiot because a meaningless offensive would get Touya nowhere; however he also agreed that Touya was playing too timidly. Neither of them seemed to be overly fond of Touya- actually, Waya was vocally not a fan- but Ochi didn't seem as quick to overlook his skill.

Nase had nothing disparaging to say about Touya, although she did comment that this play style seemed rather unlike him. That, Sai readily agreed with. Not to say he didn't agree with Ochi or Waya, but he thought they were missing a critical point; Touya was changing his style too much. Instead of capitalizing on his known skills- cutthroat offensive, nuanced traps and nimble defense- he was trying to play in a way that would explicitly counter Zama's. *A rookie mistake*, Sai said.

" *That being said, it's the first of the series.*" Sai added, optimistically.
" *He'll learn.*"

"Black's play at 14-16..." The short boy- Ochi- murmured, looking confused. "I don't understand why Touya would play something like that. It's rather slow, don't you think?"

" *A solid move, without komi,*" Sai observed.

Hikaru frowned. " *That doesn't sound like a move Akira-kun would play.*"

Sai shook his head. " *No, it sounds like something I would play.*"

Hikaru isn't sure what to make of Sai's expression; if anything, he looked rather pensive. She would have thought it was a good thing though, Akira mimicking what he learned from Sai?

" *Again, he's trying too hard to be something he isn't.*" Sai shook his head. " *And Zama-ouza is too strong not to capitalize on it.*"

Hikaru looked down at the board, frowning slightly.

"What do you think, Hikaru-san?"

Hikaru jerked her head up, startled. It felt like one of those recurring nightmares where she fell asleep in a training session and the instructor suddenly called on her to answer a question.

It was the taller boy who asked her- he hadn't said much yet, looking like he would prefer to see more of the board before adding to the discussion. She wondered why he'd asked for her opinion specifically, when his friends were freely giving theirs. Mere curiosity? Or maybe to make her feel more included? Or did he know who she was? Had he figured it out somehow? Hikaru assured herself that was highly unlikely. He was probably just being polite.

"I think if he keeps playing like this, he'll lose." She said, simply, drawing the attention of everyone in the room.

To be fair, it was an incredibly bold statement to make. They also had no idea who she was, or how familiar she was with Touya, or Go in general.

Wayu eyed her skeptically. "Not that I actually want him to win, but why do you say that?"

Hikaru wondered how best to answer that without giving too much away. The last thing she needed were people prying into her relationship with Touya, and further, her identity.

"Why wouldn't she?" Ochi answered with a snort, before she could open her mouth. "He's playing like a coward."

"Well I wouldn't say that." She disagreed, calmly, much to the boy's evident annoyance. "He's certainly being overly cautious, but it's still the opening hands. Considering the circumstances that's normal. But he seems to be trying to counter Zama-Ouza's pushy style by

meeting it with a head on defense. That strategy could work for some people, but I don't think Touya's one of them."

She paused for a moment. "He's playing like someone else. And that's why he'll lose."

Those words rang in Isumi's head long after the match was over, and the girl had gone.

She hadn't said anything else the entire time she watched, and yet she'd said it with such assuredness no one could question her. Especially not when it became clear she was right. Touya hadn't played like Touya at all.

But that just begged the question... who was he trying to play like?

Isumi was fairly sure he knew the answer, but he didn't know how to confirm or deny it. He'd only seen one match of hers; it wasn't enough to validate his suspicion, but it was enough to infer. They seemed close. It would stand to reason she would be very familiar with his play style, and he with hers. Isumi couldn't think of anyone else Touya could have been imitating.

For all he knew about her, he was still at a complete loss. Why would Touya try to play like her? Clearly because he knew, had it been her in that chair and not him, she would have easily won in a matchup against the Ouza. Isumi had to agree; a slow but deliberate offense would be the best approach against someone like Ouza- the opposite of Touya, but probably exactly like the girl. Hikaru. Or was it Cy? Which did she prefer? She'd introduced herself as Hikaru. Maybe that was her real name?

Isumi had spent more of the match deliberating on the girl than he had the match, but on both fronts he had nothing to show for his ruminations. He was left with more questions than answers.

Track 10:

Outside Feat. Beenzino (□□□)

Crush (□□□)

After her trip to Japan, it seemed like a long time before Hikaru could even get in contact with Akira after that.

She deliberated endlessly whether to contact him, and what she would say if she did. Sai was a godsend in that regard- he was well versed in the art of consoling people, even opponents, after a difficult loss. That being said Sai didn't understand the nuances of modern communication, and if she sent Sai's response it sounded less like a condolence and more like a love haiku. She compromised in just sending him a quick text, telling him he played very well and she'd love discuss the game whenever he was ready. She got a vague, 'thank you', in return, and didn't push the issue.

She felt terrible. Helpless and impotent in a way she'd never felt before. Sai assured her there was nothing she could do; this was a personal struggle that Akira must face alone. Sai had all the confidence in the world that the boy would overcome this obstacle. He said it wasn't unlike what he had went through at points in his life, or what Torajiro had went through. In the end, he would become a better player from this experience.

All the same, Hikaru wished there was something she could do. But she barely had time to take care of herself, let alone try to take care of anyone else.

She *knew* things would get hectic, but she hadn't expected this level of volatility.

She felt like $f(x)$ was splitting apart before it even really started. It was nothing in particular, their management just thought the market was too saturated with girl groups and wanted to spend some time capitalizing on their individual fame. That being said, they were going to milk everything out of this 'farewell tour' and the fans were eating it

up. Even though Hikaru would continue to expand in Japan as a solo artist with occasional collaborations with her group mates, Krystal was launching her own album as well, and starring in dozens of new movies and dramas, and Amber was starting a clothing line as well as a DJ-ing with Luna, people were acting like they were all going away forever or something. Some fans were even crying at the sight of them.

Hikaru was overwhelmed, but determined to see it through. She had a goal to strive for right now.

She wanted time off for the Hokuto Cup.

When she'd laid out her plans for management, they'd seemed extremely put out that she wanted to take off for the winter holidays-one of the highest grossing seasons of the year. But she'd remained adamant on her decision, much to the congruent confusion of both her managers and Sai. After it became clear this was going to end up as much of a stalemate as an old Western shootout, Hikaru mentioned that she thought this might be her grandfather's last Christmas, so she wanted to go to Japan to spend time with him. Eventually they managed to compromise; Hikaru would perform at the Winter Ball on Christmas Day, as well as host a talk show on New Year's day. The only continuous commitment she'd have would be a few photoshoots for a collaboration with a Japanese makeup brand, but after confirming the dates for the photoshoots and public appearances, she gladly agreed.

In the meantime though, she'd have to wrap up all of her tour before that, which would mean double performances every weekend.

It was only after an exhausting afternoon arguing over all of this that she had a chance to talk to Sai- and Yeongha.

"I see," Yeongha's expression was difficult to read, and Hikaru would have been unable to decipher it had she not been so intimately acquainted with all of his expressions from their many games. He was upset, of course, but also resigned.

He didn't like it, but he understood.

"I'm sorry." Hikaru looked down, fiddling with the go stone in her hand. "I wish I could commit, but..."

"You have nothing to be sorry for." Yeongha returned, evenly. "This is your job, Hikaru. And... I'm aware that it's not exactly a relaxing lifestyle."

Hikaru barked out a laugh. "Yes, that would be putting it mildly."

Yeongha smiled a bit. "Quite. At any rate, I myself will be traveling and playing fairly frequently, so I wouldn't have much time to come to the salon anyway. So I have an idea."

"An idea?" Hikaru tilted her head curiously.

"Yes. Why don't we play online Go?"

She blinked rapidly, staring at him with an expression of blank confusion. "Huh?"

He rolled his eyes. "Go. Online. Surely you understand what that means."

The blonde nodded slowly. "Yes, I suppose. I just hadn't realized that was a thing.... How does it work?"

He shrugged. "Some people really like it- I personally am not a fan. I prefer to see my opponent face to face. But I suppose in this instance it would suit my purposes. Really all you do is make an account and find someone to play from the other people online."

"Other people?" She repeated, sitting up some. "How many other people?"

Yeongha shrugged again. "Depends on what hour of the day, I guess. Anywhere from a hundred to a couple hundred, usually."

" *A hundred people to play, all at once?!*" Sai gasped, looking horrified, after she mentally translated his words.

" *No, no.*" Hikaru assured. " *He's saying you can choose a single opponent out of a hundred or so, whenever you want to.*"

" *Whenever you want to?*" The ghost repeated, eyes widening.

" *And wherever too, since you can play it from anywhere.*" Hikaru mused.

Sai was all but bouncing up and down, eyes wide. " *Truly? But how? What if you don't have a Go board? And where are all these hundreds of people, who are just waiting to play Go with you?*"

" *It's... remember when we watched all those people teaching Go, from my phone?*"

" *Yes, the people in your magical mirror.*" Sai nodded sagely.

Hikaru didn't argue the point. Honestly, Sai thinking it was some sort of enchanted mirror that allowed Hikaru to look at people far away was accurate enough in her book. " *It's the same thing. These people are also looking at their magical mirrors, waiting to play Go with others.*"

" *So we could play with someone right now, if you looked down at your mirror right now?*" Sai asked, excited.

Hikaru paused. "Is it an app?"

Yeongha frowned. "I'm not sure. Either way I wouldn't bother. It's bad enough having to play through a computer screen- I can't imagine how much worse it would be trying to look at such a confining space."

Hikaru nodded. She didn't think that would be a problem for Sai, considering he managed to hold an impressive game with Akira entirely in their heads.

" *I have to play on a bigger mirror, it seems.*" She told Sai, still amused by the metaphor.

Sai nodded, seriously.

"I'll text you my username." Yeongha added then, before slumping in his chair. "Damn, this is a pain though."

Hikaru frowned. "Do you hate it that much? Is the interface really bad or something?"

"Bad or something?" Yeongha repeated, before shaking his head. "More like- poorly thought out. It gets really annoying once people recognize your username and know you're a pro. You get flooded with so many requests, it's impossible to concentrate."

Hikaru winced. "Oh. I see."

Yeongha pursed his lips. "Suyeong's a fan. I'll have to ask him if he knows if there are any better sites where you don't have to deal with that. Or better yet- private servers."

Hikaru nodded. "Well, either way just let me know. It'll be nice to have, for the upcoming few months. I wonder if I could even play it on the plane?"

"Why *are* you so busy anyway?" Yeongha asked, curiously. "Suyeong told me your group 'broke up' whatever that means. He was pretty torn up about it, although he pretended not to be."

Hikaru deflated, casting a sad look at the board between them. "Tell him I'm really sorry for all of this; it was just a management thing, really. They thought we'd be more successful as individuals, especially in this crowded group entertainment market."

"Makes sense." Yeongha agreed, logically. "So, what, you're touring alone? And that's why you're so busy?"

It felt a little surreal to be holding this conversation with Yeongha of all people, but all the same she was happy to just have someone to talk to about it at all. Everyone else she normally interacted with was already in the insular entertainment community, and knew all about it. And knew all about *her*. She couldn't be candid with any of them, because she never knew who would end up talking to who, who would spill things to the press, etc. Yeongha, though, she knew she could trust with this- for his lack of interest, if nothing else.

"Sort of." She sighed. "We're doing a farewell tour, basically just because management knows they can score a ton of money out of it."

Yeongha barked out a laugh. "Oh. *That*. Suyeong even has tickets!"

"Does he?" Hikaru perked up, smiling. "Let me know which showing- I'll give him a backstage pass!"

Yeongha rolled his eyes. "Oh great. He's only going to be even more obsessed after this."

Hikaru grinned wider. To be honest, she thought it was rather sweet that he was such a fan. She would definitely make sure he knew she appreciated him.

"It's more than that, though." Hikaru added, smile dimming as a determined light shone in her eyes. "I told them I absolutely *had* to be done with all my engagements by Christmas, so I had to cram everything into these next couple weeks."

Yeongha rose a brow. "Why Christmas?"

At this, Hikaru looked perhaps a bit shy. "I'm, um, going to Japan."

"Oh, I see. Do you have relatives there?" It seemed logical to him, that she would want to have a break to see her family during the holidays.

She blushed slightly. "Well, yes, my grandfather. Of course I want to see him, but I'm also... well, I also really wanted to be able to go to the Hokuto Cup."

Yeongha was so surprised that he nearly fell out of his chair. "What?"

"The Hokuto Cup." She repeated, fidgeting. "It's-

"I know what it is." He cut her off. "I'm in it."

Hikaru's eyes widened. "You're in it too?"

"Of course." He scoffed. "I'm the best player of my generation in Korea. Did you really think they wouldn't seed me for that tournament? There's a good chance Suyeong will be picked as well. I have no doubt he'll make it through the preliminaries."

Hikaru looked stunned. Then she broke out into a huge, beaming smile. "Both of you, really? That's wonderful! Oh- now I'm so happy I made sure I could go!"

Yeongha frowned curiously. "But- why do you care so much?" A thought occurred to him, as his eyes widened. "You're not *competing* in it, are you?"

Hikaru blinked. "Huh? What? No."

Yeongha sank back into his chair. He didn't know if what he was feeling was relief or regret.

Hikaru looked away, scratching her cheek. "Um, a friend of mine is going to be in it, and I wanted to watch."

Yeongha observed her curiously. Oh, this was an interesting development. A slight flush had risen onto her cheeks as she studiously did not meet his gaze, playing with the go stones in her stone holder. He had seen this behavior on girls before, but never Hikaru. He wondered who this mystery person was. Suyeong was going to be so upset, he thought with unabashed amusement.

He'd initially thought this tournament would be a bit boring. Right now, in his generation, Korea was easily the strongest. It was debatable what order the three kingdoms of go placed in the older generations- although Touya Koyo was undoubtedly at the top regardless- but as far as the upcoming youth were concerned, Korea was well in the lead. He was the helm of a new crop of young prodigies that were only just starting to breach the professional ranks; meanwhile, he knew of no one of his caliber in Japan aside from Touya Akira. In China there was the young prodigy Zhao Shi, although he was better suited as a rival for Suyeong. There was also Lu Li, the cool and calm 5-dan, and Wang Shizhen the up and coming 4-dan who was a bit rougher around the edges. And they were just the top three Yeongha could name off the top of his head; he knew there were other solid players at the Chinese Weiqi Association. But none in Japan, as far as he knew. He'd heard something of a very young boy... Ocha? Ochin? But again, more suited as a rival for Suyeong.

"Touya Akira?" He asked aloud.

Hikaru jolted in her chair. The tips of her ears had gone red. "W-What?" She squeaked out. "How did you-

He crossed his arms and rolled his eyes dramatically. "Who else would it be? I know you visit Japan very frequently, so your friend definitely isn't from the Weiqi Association. And if you're that sure he'll be in the tournament despite the fact the preliminaries are still going on, then there's only really one person it could be."

Oh. Well when he puts it like that...

Yeongha looks curious. "How long have you been friends?"

"Err- we met the last time I went home. A little before I met you, actually."

Yeongha nodded, as if he had assumed as much. "Interesting. I thought so."

"... Huh?"

"I've seen some of his kifu." Yeongha tossed out, dismissively. "You have a very distinct style, Hikaru, so when you toss in more aggressive and modern moves it's very apparent. Now, I can see they're quite similar to Touya's style."

Hikaru would forever be impressed by the depths the players around her could read from a few patterns alone.

Yeongha's smirk turned predatory. "I hope I end up playing against him in the tournament. It'll be interesting, to say the least. Which one of your prodigies will prevail?"

Hikaru flushed spectacularly, sputtering. "You're not my prodigies!" She insisted hotly, even as Yeongha laughed and Sai covered his wide smile with his fan.

"Your modesty is so unflattering, Hikaru." Yeongha, predictably, ignored her protests.

Hikaru didn't even know what to say. They were not her prodigies, because she didn't even actually know how to play Go! All the same, she wasn't about to argue that point.

"Whatever. Text me your username." Hikaru just rolled her eyes. "And if I'm your sensei, you're not allowed to backtalk me, you know."

She refused to consider Yeongha and Akira her 'prodigies', but she did sort of like the idea of them being *SAI* 's prodigies. Yeongha and Akira were her peers, but they were definitely Sai's prodigies, so it seemed a better fit.

Sai was starting to take on a life of his own, these days, in a way Hikaru could have never expected. He was in the *news*. Not like she was, of course, but there were troves of internet forums dedicated to

his games now, his kifu reprinted everywhere. He had a level of underground fame that had most of the internet praising him as some kind of mystical Go God- like he was a character out of the Tales of Genji or something. Now that she thought about it, the comparison wasn't entirely untrue. Apparently something about his style invoked a sense of whimsy and nostalgia that deeply reminded people of the Heian era. People thought he was a ghost, or an AI of some kind. Everyone wanted to play him, and that was sort of the problem. His exclusivity was only skyrocketing his fame.

Hikaru had followed Yeongha's advice and joined what he called a 'private server'. Users could make groups and join them via invite only, and Yeongha had added her to his. He didn't tell her who the other members were, but Hikaru didn't really need to know. She knew *kyrstal14* was, adorably, Suyeong, and the generic *bad0k1* was Yeongha. Not that she could make fun of Yeongha for being unoriginal, when Hikaru herself had just chosen *SAI*. There were a few other members in the group- other professionals Yeongha was peripherally acquaintances with- but she didn't know who they were and frankly, sort of preferred it that way. Suyeong and Yeongha said it was better for her to keep her distance from the Professional Go world, lest she get found out. She'd take their word for it.

At any rate all this secrecy just made people more invested in it. Only other group members could interact with each other, but the portal itself was perfectly accessible for the internet at large. Hundreds of people watched *SAI*'s games, and hundreds more spent countless hours debating them on internet forums afterwards. Hikaru wasn't entirely sure what to make of it. Through the internet, Fujiawara no Sai came to life again, and he had a fame that could rival her own.

Well, sort of. In certain circles. It was not the same kind of fame she had, where she couldn't even walk into a supermarket anymore without someone taking a photo. But there was a certain notoriety, a certain infamy, that seemed almost just as suffocating.

The next few weeks passed in a haze of fully blocked off schedules with a few breathers here and there to play Go. People commented endlessly over SAI's erratic timing; was he a shift worker of some kind? The current running hypothesis was that he was some kind of genius doctor who had a job that was too good for him to ever quit and fully commit himself to Go- or so Suyeong said. Hikaru knew better than to look at what other people were saying about her.

A doctor. It made so much sense and yet was so completely untrue Hikaru couldn't help but laugh.

She was the farthest thing from a doctor.

But no one would ever guess her actual occupation.

She'd just finished up a photoshoot when Akira broke his self-imposed wall of silence. It had taken the better part of the morning, and Hikaru would have a brief period to travel to her next appointment, grab a bite from the catered lunch, and maybe steal a half hour to play a game of speed go with Yeongha or Suyeong. It was quickly becoming her preferred method of playing Go- it was the most time efficient way to play a match, and had the added bonus of helping the other players on her server get better at thinking on their feet. *And* Sai greatly enjoyed it. It was a win for all, as far as she was concerned.

She leaned back in her seat, enjoying the brief reprieve of silence the usual slow crawl of Seoul midday traffic allowed her.

Hikaru pulled her phone out of her bag, about to open up the Go app when it went off in her hand.

She stared at it for a long moment, trying to gather her thoughts.

"Hey," she answered, quietly. There was no one else in the car with her but the driver, but the silence made her feel like she needed to whisper.

" *Hikaru-chan*," Touya greeted, after a long moment where it seemed he too needed to gather his thoughts. " *How are you?*"

Hikaru gave a thoughtful hum. Maybe the better question is; how are *you* ?" She countered.

Another pause. " *I'm fine.*" He assured. " *I'm sorry it took me so long to get back to you.*"

"You don't have to apologize." Hikaru returned, quickly. "I totally understand you'd need time to... process things."

Touya laughed uneasily. " *That's one way of putting it. More than that... I guess I was just embarrassed.*"

"Embarrassed?" Hikaru repeated, a little too loudly. Her driver glanced at her in the rearview mirror. Hikaru waved his concern off with a sheepish smile. "What do you think you have to be embarrassed for? That's nonsense!" She continued, voice low. "It was a great series, Akira-kun. You played well. There's really nothing to be embarrassed about."

" *Maybe overall.*" He hedged, vaguely. " *But that first game was...* "

He was silent for a long moment; Hikaru waited it out by idly entertaining herself with the streets outside her window. The weather forecast was right on the money; gloomy, somewhat chilly. After so many days of it though, the pedestrians were well prepared with umbrellas in hand.

" *I just kept thinking; if you were playing, you would have the right answer.*" He paused. " *I know that attempting to play like you would have was the wrong approach, but at the time it was all I could think to do...*"

Hikaru blinked, frowning. "Then that's my fault, isn't it?"

" *Of course not!*" Touya protested immediately, with far more vehemence than she had expected. " *It's- it's a rookie mistake, honestly. I know better. I should have known better; I should have studied Zama-sensei's style more, figured my own way to approach it instead of blindly reaching for yours.*"

He laughed then, mirthlessly. " *It was like I wished you could be over my shoulder, in my head, pointing in the direction I should go.*"

Hikaru stiffened involuntarily. "That's..."

" *Nonsense, I know.*" Touya assured her calmly. " *And I've been spending these past few weeks making sure I don't do something so insensible again.*"

It wasn't completely insensible, now was it? Wasn't that exactly what Sai did for Hikaru? Stood over her shoulder, and told her where to place her stones?

"You're incredibly talented," Hikaru found herself saying, even as her thoughts seemed miles away. "There's no need to ever try to play as anyone but yourself, I promise."

" *I- thanks. Sometimes I wonder where your unshakeable faith in me comes from, though.*" Touya replied, and Hikaru could almost see him shaking his head in bewilderment. " *Considering I've never once managed to beat you.*"

"It's not about winning or losing." Hikaru sighed as she shook her head.

"... *Isn't it?*" Touya sounded confused.

Hikaru realized she'd actually said that aloud, and found herself at a loss. Sai was looking at her strangely.

"Uh- well, I mean. Go is more about learning, isn't it? Constantly improving upon yourself, learning new things, seeing the perspective

of others. It's such a subjective game, you know? There's really no right or wrong move, despite how we might argue to the contrary... and, and I suppose there's a winner, purely from a points perspective, but I guess I just never see it that way..."

She was rambling, she noticed with dismay. But she had no idea what to say, so she just babbled on. She didn't even know if she was actually making any sense. Sai was still staring at her with a wide-eyed look, as if seeing her for the first time. Hikaru blinked at him. Or maybe seeing *through* her?

On the other side of the line, Touya was silent.

Hikaru bit her lip, nervous. "Um, or I could be very wrong, of course?" She added, hastily.

"I don't think so at all." Touya replied, warmly. *"It's just exactly the sort of answer I would expect from you."*

Hikaru wasn't entirely sure how to take that.

"Is that why you're playing Netgo now?" Touya continued on, before she had to come up with a response. *"To learn new perspectives?"*

She blinked. She hadn't realized Touya even knew she was playing, but in hindsight that was rather dense of her. *Everyone* knew of SAI. Of course Touya would as well.

"Sort of." She hedged, sheepishly. "More than that though, it's more convenient for me this way."

"Personally I find the concept of playing through a screen a bit trying, but I can see how it could be extremely useful for someone in your situation." Touya commented.

Hikaru glanced at Sai. Did Sai find it trying to play through a screen? She frowned. Then again, Sai didn't even have a way to place his

own stones. For a ghost, the computer was as good a medium as any, she supposed.

"I can't say it bothers me too much." She answered, honestly.

" *Do you think you'll continue to play online, then?*"

Hikaru frowned thoughtfully. "I don't really see any reason to stop, so I suppose so."

Touya made an interested noise. " *Would it be possible to get onto your server, then? It'd be nice to play you again, even if it's through a screen.*"

Sai perked up at the words, making Hikaru smile. "Sure, of course. I don't actually know how to do that, but I guess if you give me your email I should be able to find someone who can add you?"

" *I don't mean to cause too much trouble.* " Touya added, quickly. " *If it's really that hard I can just-*

"No, no, it's not hard at all!" Hikaru assured him, grinning. "But more importantly, how do you feel about speed go?"

SAI the speed demon was currently on a winning streak as of yet unheard of in the Go world. Not that Netgo really fell into that category, at least in the professional sense, but all the same there had never been a player who had challenged so many other known professionals and *won*. People were starting to think he was a learning algorithm of some kind. That had some merit. People were also starting to think he was the reincarnated ghost of Shuusaku playing from beyond the grave. That had even *more* merit.

Not that anyone would expect the ghost of Shuusaku's current tenant to be a rising K-pop star who was currently so exhausted she was about to fall asleep between sets. Nevermind a game of speed go, she was having trouble keeping her eyes open.

Sai fretted by her side, but they both knew there wasn't much to be done about the situation. It'd been like this for weeks now, and soon enough she'd have a brief reprieve for the holidays. She just had to get through a few more days of this.

"Want one?" Krystal was holding out a can of a popular sports energy drink.

Hikaru took it gratefully. "Yeah, thanks."

They sat in a calm and comfortable silence for a long moment, as Hikaru sipped her drink.

"I hate this part." Krystal confessed, after a long moment.

Hikaru quirked a smile. "I know."

That was why she and Amber were always the designated speakers. Hikaru was very good at improvisation and being witty on the spot, so she tended to enjoy game shows and talk shows like this. Her on air personality was very gregarious, which always helped to make the group's presence feel large even when the other members didn't say much.

It'll be so strange to be on her own, she thought. She could hardly imagine the thought. Even though they only really had one album, there was no way to put into words how much her time with the group had come to mean to her. They had basically lived in each other's pockets for these last few years, through training and debuting and so many life events that she'd never get back. She couldn't help but worry about her own career too, in the aftermath. Everything seemed to be going well right now, but who was to say how long that would last? Fame was fleeting and popularity was unreliable.

Krystal shook her head. "No I mean- this." She gestured to them. "Goodbyes. It seems so soon to say goodbye."

"I can't imagine we won't be working together often in the future." Hikaru tried to reassure her. "I'm sure management has a bunch of specials planned."

Kyristal sighed. She traced the rim of her own drink. "Yeah, I know. And I get it. It's just business, and they're probably right. The girl group space is so crowded."

"It's more feasible to play on our respective strengths as solo artists." Hikaru agreed, feeling like she was just repeating what management had told them earlier. It certainly wasn't wrong, but it also felt a bit like a cop out.

"Do you still plan on being in entertainment?" Krystal asked, curious.

Hikaru blinked. "I couldn't imagine doing anything else." The thought was unfathomable, actually. "What about you?"

Krystal shrugged. "I think so. My sister has a fashion brand, you know-

"*Of course* I know," Hikaru interrupted, gasping. "I have all her pairs of sunglasses!"

Krystal rolled her eyes. "-and it might be cool to try out the fashion industry. There's a lot of overlap."

"No acting?" Hikaru joked, grinning.

Krystal gave her a pained look.

Hikaru laughed in response. Amber poked her head into the back room then. "Hey! They're calling us up now."

Hikaru grimaced, downing the rest of her drink and hoping it would kick in soon. It was only a little bit longer now.

Something New - TAEYEON ☐☐

If you're very surprised with the update... so am I. But it was so refreshing to come back to this fandom and read all the reviews of everyone who patiently waited! Tbh I thought this chapter might be somewhat small since I was pushing it out so quickly... but it turned out to be 11k XD.

Track 11:

Drip Drop

Taemin

Backstage gave a whole new level to the meaning of chaos.

People are *everywhere*, shouting loudly over each other, the residual noises of the monstrous crowd, the group currently on stage, the camera crews, the maintenance crews, the sound engineers and the entertainers being hustled from point A to point B with as much efficiency as possible. It's very overwhelming; almost to the point where it's difficult to think. Suyeong sort of wants to stop and take in the moment, but people are shoving past him and he's worried he's in the way.

F(x) had already done their pre-recording earlier in the morning, and he'd gotten to watch from the front row. That had been a really amazing experience. He'd been to concerts, but never to a recording for a Music Show like this. Despite being free usually, they were notoriously difficult to get into. The *f(x)* 'goodbye tour' especially.

The whole thing was actually quite the experience; Suyeong had shown up at what his friend Junseo called 'an appallingly late time' but was exactly when Hikaru had told him to. Junseo had apparently

been camped out there since the early morning, equipped with all of his fan goods to make sure he got into the first tier for f(x) fans.

Suyeong was a big fan, but he wasn't *this* kind of fan. He wasn't in the official fanclub or anything, and he definitely didn't have all the required band swag that was apparently necessary to get in.

Actually, there were so many people- and so many people getting denied- that he'd worried he wouldn't even get in at all. But a very harried looking staff employee had come out to grab him personally before he could worry too much.

The girls were all getting ready for their recording, so he didn't get to meet them at first. Their performance really put stars in his eyes though, and reminded him why he was a fan of the genre. People like Yeonha could complain about the spectacle of it all for as much as they liked- the spectacle was *exactly* what made it so memorable. The girls came out to the deafening screams of a crowd in pure ecstasy, dressed in the adorable pastel outfits that had come to define their latest album's look. Suyeong had seen them before of course, and he'd even seen them on their 'goodbye tour' already. But that was different; that had been in a massive stadium full of thousands of other fans. The recording studio was far more intimate a space, and being so close to the stage was a whole new experience. It was different than meeting them afterwards backstage-when he'd gone to their stadium show Hikaru had gotten him a backstage pass to meet them; they were all casual and also very clearly exhausted, their on-air personas decidedly turned off for recharge. It wasn't a bad thing, in fact it was far more authentic. He'd gotten to see a glimpse of the girls behind the stage names, which was invaluable.

On stage though, they were positively *electrifying*. They had so much presence they could mesmerize an entire audience into awed silence or frenzied screaming. He was pretty sure some people were crying. Or a lot of people, actually.

Afterwards, he was still sort of in awe with the scale of it all.

"Oh- Suyeong! Over here!"

He turned around, to see Cy poking her head out of what appeared to be some kind of dressing room. She'd changed out of her elaborate stage outfit, but her current outfit was equally cute and trendy.

"Ah... C- Cy-sshi." He stuttered, dipping his head.

Cy just looked at him funny. Then she grinned at him. "How many times have I told you to just call me Hikaru?"

It seemed positively sacrilegious. Far too informal for one, and also it felt very weird not to think of her as her on stage persona, especially with all her hair and makeup still done for the interviews later in the day.

"Right... Hikaru-unni." He corrected sheepishly.

She grinned at him. "So, how did you like the recording? It's weird right, being in such a smaller setting? Music Bank is a crazy small set!"

"It was incredible!" He enthused, and then blushed at how excited he sounded. It was true though- it was very small, but that only made it all the more appealing.

Hikaru just laughed though, looking pleased. "I'm glad to hear it! Are you hungry? There's a cafeteria on the main floor somewhere."

"I- is that really okay?" Suyeong blinked. He'd heard it was impossible for fans to actually access the building proper. They had to be led around by an escort, and weren't even allowed in the lobby even in inclement weather.

"Of course!" Hikaru assured him, gesturing him to follow her.

The studio complex was utterly massive. It had looked it from the outside, but it was just as colossal on the inside. After they left the

auditorium it was like a grand and polished maze of endless hallways, stairs and sleek glass. Hikaru eventually led him to what appeared to be a staff cafeteria; due to the somewhat strange hour, it was mostly empty.

"So, was this your first show recording?" Hikaru asked idly, as they settled into a booth.

Suyeong had gotten a sandwich, but Hikaru had waved off most of the heavier lunch fair in favor of a parfait. She said she rarely had much appetite, especially in between sets like this. Suyeong could understand that; it was probably similar to the feeling before a really important match, like his body was just too anxious for food. All the same, he sort of felt like she ought to eat a little more than that. Even for a k-pop idol, outside of the bright stage lights she looked painfully thin.

"Yeah, it was. I was really surprised by how different it is from a regular concert." He paused, chewing thoughtfully. "Even though it's free, I feel like it was more exclusive."

She nodded, grinning. "It's *because* they're free that they're so hard to get into. That, and the venues are obviously much smaller than the big stadium tours."

"I really liked it." He said, flushing slightly. "Krystal looked so cool in her outfit- err, I mean, you did too but-

Hikaru broke out into peels of laughter. He flushed some more. "No, no, I totally understand." She smiled widely, looking delighted. "She's your 'best girl', huh?"

"It's not like that!" He insisted, but it was a moot point. His username online was *krystal14* after all; at this point, Hikaru knew all his dirty secrets.

"She does definitely have the best outfits this tour," Hikaru continued, idly, as she mixed her parfait. "But just you wait- my last outfit is

going to be totally awesome. I got to plan it out myself. It's this crazy pearlescent white suit combo with wide leg pantsuits and-

She broke off, looking sheepish. "Well, let's just say it's a very fun outfit."

"All of this seems really fun." Suyeong commented, still in awe of everything.

Hikaru scratched her cheek. "Ahh... well, it certainly might seem like it from the outside, but in reality more than anything it's exhausting."

"Oh, I can absolutely see that too." Suyeong agreed immediately. "It's all- well, it's a lot."

"That's a good way of putting it." She nodded, around a mouthful of yogurt. "Anyway, how are you? I feel like it's been ages since I've seen you."

It was still so surreal to sit here and chat with Cy as if they were old friends just catching up after a long spell away from each other. Casually, over a quick bite for lunch, with no pretenses or fanfare. Suyeong supposed he really shouldn't be so taken aback by it these days, since he and Hikaru actually played baduk online together fairly often. She was probably the sole reason he managed to do so well in the Hokuto Cup prelims. On the subject of that...

"I'm good. I made third board for the Hokuto Cup."

"That's amazing! I'm so glad!" Hikaru gasped, delighted. "I can't wait to watch it! Are you excited?"

"Yes, but it'll be hard." Suyeong looked down at his sandwich. "I'll have to train a lot to be good enough to stay at Yeongha's side. I feel like every time I think I'm close to his level, I find the gap is bigger than I thought."

"I don't think it's as big as you think," Hikaru countered, setting her cup down. It was so strange; one moment she was Cy, this larger than life stage persona. In the next she was his familiar friend and teacher, gently guiding him through problems with wise advice and that calm voice of hers. "Yeongha takes you very seriously, which says a lot about your caliber. He might seem like an unattainable goal right now, but at your current trajectory you'll reach him in no time."

Suyeong sighed. "It's just hard to wait, sometimes."

"Well, it's not as if you're just sitting around idly either." Hikaru said, picking up her cup again with a flourish. "You're constantly improving. I would say the biggest things for you to work on would be being more cautious in your openings and less cautions in your end game."

"I know." He sighed again. She'd told him as much before. "But when the board is so open like that I feel like I just have to seize the moment, you know?"

"Yes, but not if you can't make up the points of a costly mistake by the end." Hikaru countered.

"You're always so good at that." Suyeong noticed, quietly.

"At what?" Hikaru blinked.

He paused, thoughtful. "Thinking things through before acting, I guess. Not just in the game, too. Just in general."

Hikaru blinked again. "Huh. Thanks... I guess?"

"It was definitely a compliment!" He added, hastily. "I don't know how to explain it. It just seems like... you're never caught off guard. In Baduk, but also in life. Especially in game shows and stuff like that. Even when things don't go as planned, you always seem to know what to do. Like, that time when you guys had a concert and the

sound system started acting up, and you MC'd to keep the crowd entertained while they fixed it."

Hikaru leaned back, clearly surprised. "You were there for that?" That had been one of their first concerts. They hadn't really had the fanbase they had now back then.

Suyeong blushed. "I was a big fan of Jessica, so I was really excited when I heard her sister was going to be in a group after she left SNSD."

Hikaru grinned widely. " *Oh*, " she crooned, delighted, "she's not your 'best girl', she's your *forever girl*~

"It's not like that!" Suyeong complained.

Hikaru only continued to laugh.

Suyeong puffed his cheeks, crossing his arms. "A- Anyway, what about you? How are you doing?"

"Me? Ah, I'm doing fine." She said easily, smiling. It was the sort of response that seemed perfectly at ease and yet rang a little false. "Super busy, but good. I'm really looking forward to my trip to Japan. There are a couple of endorsements I'm really excited to start, and of course, I cannot wait to watch the Hokuto Cup!"

Suyeong chuckled warily. "... This is a lot of pressure, y'know..."

"Oi! Hikaru! Way to make your escape before makeup could catch you." An annoyed voice called over their booth.

Suyeong looked up and near dropped his sandwich.

Hikaru just rolled her eyes. "It's *hours* until the interview. My makeup will just be messed up by then anyway."

Krystal sighed heavily. "You're so lucky you're quick, I swear you get out of everything..."

She blinked then, looking down at Suyeong. "Ah! You're Hikaru's friend, aren't you? You were at our concert the other day!"

Star struck, Suyeong could do nothing but nod.

Krystal smiled at him. "Did you watch our performance today? How was it? I messed up my timing on that last move, didn't I?"

"N- Not at all!" Suyeong insisted, flushing brilliantly. "You were awesome!"

"He approves of your outfit." Hikaru cut in with a sly grin.

Suyeong whipped back to stare at her in mortified horror. Hikaru couldn't help but laugh at his expression.

Krystal just beamed, tossing her glossy hair. "It was pretty good, huh? I *told* you my outfit was the best."

"It wasn't a competition!" Hikaru stuck her tongue out. "And I told *you*- you haven't even *seen* my best costume, just wait for it."

"Oh, it's not a competition eh?" She waggled her brows. "Sounds like one to me!"

"Why is *everything* a competition with you two?" Luna cried, as she rounded up behind Krystal and threw her arms around the other girl, messing up her hair.

Krystal gasped. "Ah! Sunyoung-unniie get off~"

"You're so fluffy!" Luna replied, and only proceeded to mess her hair up even more.

"Off! Off! You harpy!"

Luna fake gasped. "Oi, oi! Sooyoung-ah, how dare you speak to your elders that way!"

"Why wouldn't I, when you act like you're younger than Suyeong here!"

Suyeong flushed to his roots. He couldn't *believe* Krystal actually remembered his name! Maybe dreams really did come true. He couldn't wait to tell Junseo this. The other boy was going to *lose his mind*.

"Anyway," Luna cut in, crossly. "You both need to come back for hair and makeup now; they're doing some backstage filming before we go on stage."

Krystal sighed dramatically, and even Hikaru looked a little defeated.

"Sorry to cut our lunch short, Suyeong." She said, apologetically.

"Not at all!" He protested. He'd mostly finished his sandwich, anyway. Meanwhile, Hikaru hadn't even made a dent in her parfait. "This has been so cool, thank you so much!"

"Of course! It was so great seeing you!" She grinned brightly then. "I guess the next time I'll see you is in Japan, huh? I'm looking forward to it!"

"My goodness Hikaru- you're wasting your talent on me!" Shindou Heihachi chortled, in a state of stilted amusement and disbelief.

Hikaru rubbed the back of her head sheepishly. "Haha... thanks Jii-chan."

" *Sai!*" She mentally protested " *I thought we agreed you'd go easy on him?*"

Sai looked confused. " *I was going easy on him!*"

" *Clearly not enough.*" She grouched. " *Maybe we should have gone with a ten stone handicap instead of five?*"

Sai had told her that most beginners, when facing off against an opponent of far greater skill, put down a few stones to even the playing field. It was why Akira had asked her when they first met if she wanted to use a handicap. According to Sai, *pretending* to play underneath a handicap was sort of the equivalent to throwing a game, and while he was against that on vehement principal he could admit it was necessary in the situation. They'd argued a bit on it, because Hikaru didn't want Sai to feel as if he was going against his principles- what with what happened to him, and all that- but Sai assured her this was fine. As long as they weren't actually swapping stones off the board.

Maybe she should have done that, though. Her grandpa had fairly poor eyesight; maybe he wouldn't have even noticed? At any rate, they definitely should have tried harder to make her look bad.

"- going to call the Institute up right now and *insist* they take you, I was quite the player myself back in the day, they'll listen to me-

"Ojii-chan!" Hikaru whined. "You can't do that!"

"Why not?" He looked affronted. "You're better than any of their silly pros!"

Their pros certainly weren't silly, she wanted to protest. Instead she pointed out; "I can't be a pro, jii-chan! I already have a job, remember?"

Her grandfather crossed his arms, scoffing. "Is that what we're calling work these days?"

Hikaru didn't take any offense to it, though. Her parents barely even understood what she did; some days, even *she* didn't know how to explain it. What was an idol, exactly? If she had to write herself a resume, what would she even put? *A fair dancer, very good at looking silly but endearing on game shows, excellent vocal range, mediocre actress, secret go player?*

"Yes, jii-chan. It *is* work, and speaking of, I have an appointment I need to get to." She slowly rose out of *seiza*, stretching her stiff legs as she peered out the window to consider the sky outside. It looked like it was threatening snow when she'd arrived, and even after a full game of Go it still had yet to start.

"Fine, fine. You're coming over for Christmas day, right? I already told the neighbors you'd be coming to the potluck."

"I'll be there in the evening! I have that concert, remember?" Hikaru reminded, as she ducked out the door. "I'll call you later, okay? Bye jii-chan!"

" *You know, your grandfather is actually very good.*" Sai said, as she walked briskly in the chilly winter air. " *For an amateur, I mean. It's possible you could have some latent talent, Hikaru-chan.*"

" *You really think so?*" Hikaru asked idly, as she studied her phone. Traffic looked awful; maybe she should try the subway? The station was far from her grandfather's house though, and she'd have to change lines.

This was of course to assume she should take public transportation at all. She had a driver, actually, but it felt weird to ask him to drive her around for personal reasons, like going to visit her grandfather. Although now she was a ways away from where she needed to be for a work-related appointment and no way to get there...

" *I do. I think you'd be an incredible player, Hikaru.* " There was something very austere to Sai's tone- something that made her actually pause in the street and look up from her phone.

" *Why do you think that?*" She asked, genuinely curious.

She'd never made much effort into learning the game, after all. She didn't even know all that much about it.

" You have very good instincts for it." Sai explained. " You know, there are times when I don't even say anything and yet you say what I would have wanted anyway. You'll comment on a move in the same manner I would, or approach a situation in the way I think would be best."

Hikaru chuckled. *" Are you sure I just don't have a good instinct for you ?"* She countered, amused.

Sai slid open his fan; a gesture that meant he was thinking deeply. *" I think you know me very well."* He admitted. *" But I also don't think you're giving yourself enough credit. You could be an amazing player, Hikaru. Maybe even better than Touya-kun and Yeongha-kun."*

" That's a bit of a stretch, don't you think?" She returned, wryly.

" No, not at all." And his tone was so serious she couldn't help but wonder where this was coming from.

Sai wished he could put it into words in a more tactful manner, because he had a feeling if he was too forceful on the subject Hikaru would either brush him off or shy away from the idea of it. She had no faith in her Go, even though it was clear she had some level of skill in it. It's true she was a very tactful and insightful person all around; somewhat at odds with her bubbly and effervescent 'on air' personality, but not entirely so. She had always been very careful with her every word and action, ever since he had met her. She was well used to people observing her every move, and it showed. That sort of self-awareness lent itself very well to Go, where observing and predicting your opponents moves ultimately was what won you the game.

Not to mention, she seemed to subconsciously pick up on a lot of what went on in her surroundings. Sai hadn't been kidding when he'd said she'd surprised him more than once by saying exactly what he'd been thinking. There had been that time when she'd told Touya that Go was more than just winning or losing, when he'd completely lost

sight of reality, lost in such a vertigo he'd momentarily forgotten who and what he was. He'd felt as if he was watching himself, attempting in vain to teach the Emperor the true meaning behind the nuanced game.

He had a feeling that she could play a game fairly well right now, even without ever actually having played one. She would know, just by instinct now, the general feel of where to put stones. She might not have the terminology for it, or even truly understand her own reasoning behind it, but she would be able to tell when someone was laying a trap for her, when someone had made a mistake and left a wide opening for attack or even when it was time for her to retreat. She had a natural and unmistakable eye for the flow of the game.

Now, the only real problem was how to convince her of such.

He'd made observations like this before- although never this frankly- and she brushed it off every time. If she played his move before he told her to while they were playing netgo, it was of course just a stroke of good fortune. If he mentioned she was getting a lot better at translating his intentions from just a tilt of his head or a point of his finger, it wasn't because she understood the game better, it was just practice.

Sai observed her carefully as she got into yet another one of those black cars she referred to as 'taxis', rattling off an address to the driver.

If Sai was being honest, for as much as she reminded him of himself, she reminded him greatly of Torajiro as well.

He wondered why, after all these years haunting that goban, it was Hikaru who finally saw him. The goban had traded countless hands in the interim since Shusaku's death, and not a single soul had ever been able to hear his voice. And then, a young, bubbly girl who didn't even really know what Go was accidentally gets hit in the face with his goban while trying to grab something else. At the time, he'd just been so ecstatic to finally have someone see him again that he

hadn't questioned it. Now though, he really had to wonder. Torajiro had reminded Sai of himself as well, but he'd always assumed that was because of Sai's own influence on the boy. They had met when he was extremely young, after all.

But Hikaru was already independent and mature by the time they had met. She had her own career, and her own way of going about things. She certainly knew a lot of things he didn't too, so it's not as if he had to teach her anything like he had Torajiro. And she didn't play Go, so it's not as if they spent hours discussing games with each other, getting an intimate feel for the inner workings of each other's minds. There was no real reason for her to emulate him so impressively, which could only mean she wasn't actually emulating him at all. This was just how she was.

Which begged the question; *why* was she the one?

He turned the question round and round in his head, as Hikaru jetted off first to hair and makeup, and then straight into one of those 'shoot photos'. It was as loud and chaotic as they usually were, but Sai had found a place in the corner to float about and get lost in his thoughts.

(It's not about winning or losing.)

She'd said it so unthinkingly, and yet it was clear she'd meant it wholeheartedly. Hikaru really didn't believe Go to be about winning or losing, which was a surprisingly wise outlook for someone who didn't even know how to play. After all, at first glance- and indeed, even to those who have studied the game in depth- Go was a game of strategy and war. It was absolutely about winning or losing, about decisively cutting a path through your opponent's defense while holding your own, about gaining territory while maintaining territory. Even Sai had thought that for a very long time.

He'd always been so obsessed with finding the Hand of God: obtaining that indisputable, sublime move. He wondered if he had even known what he was searching for, though. After all, what *is* the Hand of God? After so many years, he's come to realize it wasn't

one single move. It might not even belong to one single person. It might not even be about winning at all.

Perhaps the Hand of God is not a move, but a state of enlightenment that cannot actually be found in the stones at all.

If that's the case, he wondered what it was he'd spent all this time searching for.

" *Are you alright, Sai?*" Hikaru asked, worried.

Sai hadn't said much all of yesterday after they'd stopped over to visit her grandfather, and hadn't said much today, either. Usually she woke up, consulted her schedule, and found pockets that would allow for some time for netgo. Unfortunately, despite this supposedly being a 'vacation', by the time marketing had gotten a hold of her schedule there had been far less leisure time and far more appointments.

Hikaru had an unfortunately early start, but that misfortune turned into a blessing by the mid afternoon, where her schedule cleared up for the rest of the day. It was the perfect opportunity to go and visit Akira, and she didn't intend to waste it. She would have thought Sai would be ecstatic at the prospect of playing the other boy again, but he'd been oddly quiet all day.

" *Of course.*" Her ghost said, after a long moment of silence. " *Really, I ought to be asking you that question!*"

" *Me?*" She looked down at her second energy drink of the day. " *I'll be fine.*" She waved him off. " *I've been through worse.*"

Sai pursed his lips, in that way he did when he had a lecture building up. " *Ne, Hikaru-chan, I really think-*

"Shindou-san? We're ready for you now!"

Saved once again, Hikaru thought, amused, as Sai pouted. It's not that she didn't appreciate the sentiment, but he really didn't have to go so far. Whether Hikaru actually had any talent in the game or not, she wasn't going to stop playing. She knew Sai held some level of guilt for always making her play for him, but Hikaru honestly didn't mind it. Even if she never learned to play, she'd still play for him.

She hopped off her chair, making her way into the bold colored monstrosity that was acting as today's set. Amber high-fived her as she walked on, causing her to grin widely.

"So you two, how does it feel to no longer be in the same group?" The host asked immediately, diving right in.

Hikaru waved it down immediately. "I wouldn't say it with such finality!"

"Yeah, yeah. I don't think f(x) will ever 'really' be broken up." Amber agreed.

"You guys just held the last performance of your farewell tour though, didn't you?" He countered, raising a brow.

"Well sure- I think what Amber means to say is that, while we don't have any plans right now, I don't think we've taken the idea completely off the table." Hikaru returned. She glanced at her (former?) groupmate. "I mean, look at us now right? Not even broken up for a full week and we're already back together!"

Amber laughed. "You just can't stay away from me!"

"It's your cavalier charm." Hikaru replied, smirking.

Their host just watched the display with interest. "So you would say the group has a lot of plans to continue working on projects together?"

"Absolutely!" Amber enthused. "While we're all currently focused on our own solo pursuits, I think if we have an opportunity to make music again, we will."

"But no immediate plans." The host pressed.

"Not in the immediate future, no." Amber replied, in a textbook evasive answer. "I'll be pretty busy with this UNIQLO worldwide tour, and I think Hikaru's got her hands full here in Japan for a little bit."

"Let's talk a little bit more about that. You both are part of the brand's *Open World* campaign, featuring new and upcoming talent from across the world. Can you expand a little on why you feel you're good picks for this idea of a global human?"

Amber and Hikaru exchanged looks. Well, there go the softball questions....

"Hmm," Amber went up to bat first. "I think because of my experience growing up in LA and being Taiwanese have certainly given me a global perspective. And then of course I moved to Korea and have citizenship there now."

"She has three names you know," Hikaru added, winking. "Shall I list them out for you?"

"Stop," Amber whined, but they both knew it was in jest.

"Is that true?" The host looked genuinely curious to know.

"Yeah, it is. It sure gets confusing after a while." Amber replied, laughing self-deprecatingly. "My mom is always shouting at me like, "*Liu Yi Yun! What do you mean you haven't done your laundry in a month?*" and all of my friends from back home and most of my fans call me Amber. But sometimes they use my Korean name, Yoo Eunyoung too."

"And sometimes we just call you llama." Hikaru cut in, grinning widely.

"That too." Amber agreed sagely. "My favorite, personally."

"What about you, Hikaru? Your parents are originally from here, right? Your English is excellent, by the way."

"Thank you!" Hikaru beamed at him. "Yes, my parents are originally from Japan. My grandfather still lives here, actually, so I like to come back to visit. They're both in America now, though, and I've spent these last few years in Korea. Having that sort of background has really been invaluable to me, personally. I think it really allows me to connect with a lot of people, and I hope that conveys well through my music."

Sometimes, answering these interview questions seemed more like answering essay questions.

"Yes, I think it does. So you guys just finished up your photoshoot for the new spring/summer campaign; what were your favorite pieces?"

Hikaru let out an inaudible sigh of relief when the host changed the subject onto easier topics. She couldn't help but be thankful Amber was here for her first interview after f(x) had officially broken up. It was so much easier to do these with the other girls helping her out when she couldn't finish her sentence, or lobbing easy segues for her to transition into. It would be really tough to have to do this on her own.

Afterwards, she gave a heartfelt farewell to her favorite LA native, with a promise to meet up again after the holidays were over. Amber was going to spend some much deserved time off with her family back home, and wouldn't be back on this side of the ocean for at least a month. Hikaru was envious, but also very happy for her.

Hikaru felt a bit maudlin, honestly.

Sure, she had her grandfather, but it wasn't exactly the same.

She knew both her father and mother had moved on; gotten remarried, moved to the states- she thinks she even has a half-sibling on the way. Or maybe she already had one? She didn't keep up with her father much. But it had never mattered to her, because she always had her career keeping her beyond busy. There was always training, homework, and lessons to keep her occupied, and then once she debuted she barely had time to think, let alone think about her parents. She was always surrounded by people, groupmates, managers, fans, all regularly in her orbit. And on top of that, she now had a Go-playing ghost haunting her!

She had no time to feel lonely. Especially not now, when she wanted to get to Akira's as quickly as possible.

She'd texted him after she'd gotten out of her interview, wanting to meet up at his salon for a game. To her surprise, he'd returned that he wasn't at his father's salon. He was with his teammates preparing for the Hokuto Cup at his house, but she was welcome to come. In fact, he said, her presence would be greatly appreciated.

After checking the time, she decided she'd bring them something for dinner while she was there, so after picking up the food she had her driver head over to his place.

" I wonder who's on his team." Hikaru mused, excited, as the dark Tokyo skyline passed them by.

" I as well," Sai agreed heartily. *" I'm unfamiliar with the current young Japanese pros."*

" You and me both! I can barely keep up with the Korean league, and I feel like Suyeong and Yeongha are always talking about their peers."

" Speaking of, how did his match in the Chunlan Cup go? Can you find out in that mystical box of yours?"

Hikaru chuckled under her breath, forever amused by how Sai approached modern technology. She opened her browser on her phone and went to the Korean Baduk news site she'd kept bookmarked ever since she'd started becoming friends with Suyeong and Yeongha in earnest.

" He did!" She informed, enthusiastically. " Oh! Wow! It says here that Suyeong won his game too- against Kim Kangil 9-dan! I'll definitely have to congratulate him on that."

" He's improved so much recently." Sai smiled, happily. " His progress has truly been a joy to watch."

Most of that probably has a lot to do with you. Hikaru thought, fondly. It occurred to her then that she might be accidentally sabotaging Team Japan's chance at the Hokuto Cup; after all, she played Suyeong and Yeongha fairly regularly online. While she played Akira too, she couldn't even name the other two members of his team.

Her car pulled up to a vaguely familiar street, a gated historic house on the opposite side of the street with a lantern on at the front gate. She gave the man a thankful farewell, and waved off his concerns when he asked if he should stay and wait for her. Worst comes to worst she can always just take the subway back to her hotel.

She rang the doorbell, and only after she had pressed it did a sudden wave of anxiety hit her.

Uh-oh. She hadn't stopped to even think about Akira's parents.

She thought back on their last impromptu meeting with amusement and a bit of embarrassment. Hopefully they wouldn't hold that against her!

But the person who opened the door was most decidedly not one of Akira's parents.

Actually, it was a boy her age. Maybe even younger.

"Err- uh, I mean, um..." He sputtered out, eyes wide.

"Good evening! I'm Shindou Hikaru- a friend of Akira's?"

"Ah, Hikaru!" A familiar voice called from down the hall. Akira peered out from behind a far wall, waving his hand. "In here!"

She waved back, smiling brightly. It was such a relief to see his face again after all this time.

"What's your name?" She asked the boy politely, as she took off her shoes.

He sputtered again, flushing slightly. "I'm- uh, Yashiro. Yashiro Kiyoharu."

"Nice to meet you, Yashiro-kun! Are you participating in the Hokuto cup as well?"

He nodded silently, ears turning a bit red. Hikaru watched his reaction with amusement, wondering if perhaps he recognized her. He was around her age after all.

She rounded the corner then, into what she could only assume was ground zero for the boy's Go bootcamp. There were rolled up futons in the corner, with not one but three gobans set up in the middle of the room. Off to the side was a truly impressive amount of tea, as well as a coffee maker. She hoped they weren't planning on pulling any all nighters. Didn't they know sleep was integral for memory recall?

"I brought food!" She called cheerfully, as she entered the room.

"Oh, Hikaru, you didn't have to do that!" Akira protested, surprised.

She just grinned widely at him. "I figured you wouldn't say no to dumplings if I brought some, though."

"Fair enough." He agreed sheepishly; he clearly also remembered the last time she had been at his house.

"Huh? Hold on..."

Hikaru paused as she set the bags down on the far ledge, turning at the surprised voice. The last boy was still seated across Akira, looking at her with recognition.

"You're Nase's friend! You came to watch Touya's Oza match!"

"Ah, you remember me?" So that's where she recognized him from. "It's nice to see you again. Um... Waya-kun, right?" She was lucky she'd always been fairly good with names. It had only served her well, especially in her career.

He nodded. "Um. Yeah. And you're... uh... "

"Shindou," she filled in for him, laughing a little at his sheepish expression. "Shindou Hikaru."

"Right. Shindou-san." He too looked a bit mystified with her. Did he know who she was now too? It was hard to tell.

She wandered over to where she remembered the kitchen to be. "Akira, where are your bowls again?"

At this, Akira leapt to his feet. "Hikaru, seriously! You don't have to do this." He followed her into the kitchen. "I didn't ask you to come over just to take care of us, you know."

"I know, but I find the situation really worrying." Hikaru replied, teasing. "From the looks of this place... your parents aren't home, I take it?"

"My father has a game in China, actually." Akira admitted, sheepishly.

"Yeah, see, I have a feeling if I don't force you all into eating something now, you'll spend the whole night playing Go without even stopping to sleep!"

There was only telling silence from Akira.

She whirled on him, horrified. "Akira! Don't tell me you were planning on playing nonstop?!"

"Well, Kurata-sensei is planning on getting here tomorrow morning, and we wanted time to practice before that-

"Then practice until a reasonable hour, and then get some sleep!" Hikaru huffed, rolling her eyes as she continued onwards to the kitchen. "I mean seriously, you realize how important sleep is for your brain, right? *Especiallly* when you have such an important match coming up soon!"

"I know, I know..."

Meanwhile, Yashiro and Waya watched the two bicker on their way to the kitchen in stunned disbelief.

"I'm guessing that's Touya's wife, huh?" Yashiro joked, drily.

Waya blinked out at the hallway. "I guess so." He agreed, dumbly. "I hadn't realized he even had a girlfriend."

Yashiro let out a loud sigh, collapsing on the tatami across from Waya. "Man, must be nice, having a girlfriend who supports you." He mused with a wide yawn.

Waya laughed. "Do you have girl troubles, Yashiro?" He was a pretty young and good-looking dude, Waya supposed. Well, his expression could borderline on a little aggressive at times, but maybe some girls were into that?

Yashiro shook his head. "It's not really about the girl, as much as it's just... I dunno. It must be nice having people who support you

playing Go and stuff."

Waya sat up a little straighter at that. "Do your parents not support you?"

"Not really." He shrugged. "They don't really understand Go all that much, so they think it's just a hobby. That's why I've gotta win this tournament- I have to show them it's not just something I do for fun. It's a real job."

"Ah, I can understand that." Waya replied, thoughtfully. "I hadn't thought of it that way, but you're right. It must be really nice for Touya- having so many people who support him and stuff."

"It's more than that too, though."

Both boys bolted upright at the new voice, looking sheepish and a bit guilty at being caught gossiping. It was the girl- Shindou- and fortunately she didn't look annoyed with them. Actually, she was smiling slightly, in a rather disarming manner that put them at ease.

"It's a lot of pressure too. Y'know, what with his father's reputation and stuff. On the one hand, it's nice that all the people in his life understand what he's doing and acknowledge his goals, but on the other, it's probably not easy. With everyone always looking at you and just assuming you'll be good. It's a lot to live up to."

She looked rather contemplative by the end of it, staring off into the distance in the direction of where Touya was presumably still in the kitchen.

"That's true... I hadn't thought of it that way." Yashiro admitted. "People have so many expectations of a guy like Touya."

"Sorry- not to make it sound like your own situation isn't difficult." Shindou added then, quickly. "I mean, it's no fun either to not be taken seriously. Especially when it's clear you really are very dedicated to playing Go, right?"

"Ah... right, yeah." Yashiro agreed, surprised that she'd agreed with him as well.

She clapped her hands then, settling in on the mats with them. "So- are you two excited for your matches?"

Yashiro and Waya exchanged glances. "I'm not sure if 'excited' is the right word for it..." Waya began.

"I'm looking forward to them, definitely." Yashiro replied, steadfast. "They'll be tough, but I'm eager for the opportunity to prove myself."

"I see. What board are you?"

"Third board." He answered gruffly.

Shindou tapped her chin. "Hmm, third board. You'll be playing Suyeong, then."

"Who's Suyeong?" Touya's voice floated in from the hallway. After a moment he appeared in the doorway, carrying a stack of bowls and a cup of chopsticks.

He set them down on the kotatsu pushed up against the wall, and gave Shindou a dark look when it looked like she was about to get up and try to help him. With a sheepish expression, she sunk back to the ground and waited patiently for him to hand her a cup of tea. Waya was privately embarrassed for both of them. God, they were just so *sappy*. Who would have thought Touya had it in him? Then again, he had always been courteous and polite to a fault.

"Suyeong is a friend of mine- we play together pretty often." She answered, as they all migrated towards the table.

"I see. Online, or in person?"

"Usually online, but in person whenever I have the time." She looked up at him with a mirthful grin. "He's a big fan of ours, actually."

Touya actually laughed aloud. It was such a foreign sound it was a bit startling to Waya. "Is he really?"

"Yeah. It's so cute. But don't tell him I said that." She smirked into her cup. "Anyway- he's a very good player. Yashiro-kun. Don't underestimate him just because of his age. He actually just trounced Kim Kangil 9-dan by five points in his last match."

Yashiro reared back, clearly still taken aback by Shindou's general existence. In his defense, Waya was finding her very hard to come to terms with, and he'd already met her once.

"Right." Yashiro nodded, once he recovered himself. He reached for one of the bowls, serving himself a few dumplings. "What kind of player is he?"

Shindou took another sip of tea. "Well, if I had to use an adjective I'd call him... wily, I guess. He's hard to pin down. He can get himself out of just about any situation, so make sure if you try to corner him you don't leave him any exits, because he will find them. His mid-game is very strong...

Waya supposed it was really just the mystery of it all.

It wasn't until after Shindou had made her excuses to leave- well past midnight- that it occurred to Waya that he hadn't actually learned anything about the girl. She'd just sort of shown up like she'd been invited (and from Touya's reaction, presumably she had been) brought them dinner, and sat around and made some observations about their games and styles. She observed him and Yashiro playing a game, and actually had some impressive critiques for both of them. She could tell right off the bat that Yashiro was too brash and Waya wasn't brash enough. She did applaud Yashiro's use of the tengen opener though, which Waya was fairly sure Yashiro had only pulled out again because he wanted to impress her.

Touya looked at her like she was the oracle of Go or something, which was surreal in and of itself. He'd never seen Touya look at

anyone like that, not even his own father, whom most would argue was the top player in the world right now. Waya wanted to brush it off as a boyfriend who was obsessed with his girlfriend, but that didn't sit well with him.

Also, for the life of him, he couldn't *actually* tell if they were dating or not.

They referred to each other very informally, to the point it would be rather scandalous if they weren't. And it was clear Shindou had been to his house before. But maybe she was just a friend who played Go- or perhaps was also in his father's study group, and had therefore been here before? They weren't overly affectionate, or affectionate at all now that he thought about it. But a lot of Japanese couples were like that, and it seemed a lot like Touya's style to adhere to the more traditional way of doing things.

So, it was a bit of a toss up really. He couldn't even find a way to ask Touya without making everything totally awkward, so he decided to push his curiosity to the side in favor of the greater matter at hand. They did have a very important tournament to win, after all. This was their chance to get on a world stage and announce that Japan's talent was only just beginning.

Even if the whole thing was, frankly, utterly exhausting.

It's only hours later, after an exhausting all nighter and an even more exhausting day being under the wrath of drill sergeant Kurata-sensei that he finally gets some, but not all of his questions answered.

Waya was falling asleep on his feet, barely able to keep his eyes open as he scuttled onto the subway, bleary eyed and yawning. The train was crowded with the end of the day rush hour home, making it an uncomfortable and long ride. It was made even worse when his mother texted him halfway through the ride asking him if he could run a few errands for her. He would love to find an excuse out of it,

but he was still freeloading at their house until he had enough to move out, so his guilty conscious wouldn't let him find a way out of it.

The absolute *last* thing Waya wanted to do after the hellish forty-eight hours he'd had was subject himself to the horror that was Shibuya crossing at rush hour, but he'd already resigned himself to his fate when he'd agreed to run errands for his mother. Shibuya was really the worst of it, though. What did she even really need here anyway?

Quite honestly he wasn't sure he'd manage to last through running the errands without some kind of stimulant, so he makes a beeline for the first vending machine he sees once he exits the station.

Waya gave a sigh of relief as he uncapped his iced coffee, bringing it to his lips.

When he opened his eyes, he locked gazes with Shindou Hikaru.

She winked at him.

He spewed out his drink.

He hacked his way through a few dry heaves, earning himself some wary looks from the crowds. He ignored all the looks, a little too preoccupied.

It wasn't *actually* Shindou Hikaru in the flesh, but he could recognize that face anywhere. Especially after only seeing it just last night.

In light of that, the resemblance was obvious. Even though she hadn't been wearing much makeup last night, and had her hair thrown up in a hasty ponytail, the girl from last night was very clearly the girl gazing at him from the digital billboard across the street. It was an ad campaign of some kind, clearly. A big one at that, to be playing on one of the massive screens at Shibuya crossing. He probably looked like an idiot, but he couldn't help it. He was just... having a bit of trouble connecting the dots right now.

Eventually, he realized why *else* she was familiar.

Up on the billboard, it was easy to see; this was Cy, the k-pop idol sensation that originally hailed from Japan. She had a Japanese album out, that Waya was even a peripheral fan of. He had at least listened to some of her songs enough to know the lyrics- not that he'd ever admit that to anyone.

Still, it was one thing to recognize her, it was another to connect the girl on the billboard to the girl from earlier. He was still struggling with that last part, even as he numbly stumbled through the crossing and found his way to the shop his mother had wanted him to visit.

Hold on, did that mean Touya Akira was dating a *pop star* ?!

Waya spent the rest of his time in Shibuya in a daze.

He had no idea what to make of it, so of course he does what any panicked person does in a fit of hysteria; he calls his best friend.

"Did you know Touya's dating a pop star?" He bellowed immediately. In hindsight he could have said that without all the theatrics, because now everyone on his train home was staring at him.

" *Ah... haha...*" Isumi chuckled weakly, forever a terrible liar.

A look of outrage crossed Waya's face as he stared out at the passing scenery. "You knew and you didn't tell me?!"

" *Well, I suspected.*" Isumi corrected, sheepishly. " *I didn't know for sure, and I didn't want to go around spreading those kind of rumors anyway.*"

That was a good point. Isumi wasn't the kind of person to gossip, so it's not surprise he would keep his thoughts to himself. All the same, a little warning would have been nice.

"This is crazy." Waya sighed, rubbing the back of his head.

" Well, it is a little weird." Isumi agreed, calmly. " But not entirely surprising. She's very good at Go, so they certainly have that in common."

Waya blinked. "So she *does* play Go?" He had assumed as much from how she'd approached last night, but it was hard to say how good she was from a few words of advice alone.

" Extremely well, I imagine. At least from their game we saw that one time."

"What game?" Waya gasped, again, perhaps a bit too loudly. He gave a sheepish look at the annoyed commuters around him; he was going to get kicked out at this rate. He lowered his voice to a near whisper. "When did we see their game?"

" You don't remember? That day we went to that new salon by Ikebukuro."

His mouth dropped open. "That was her?!"

This time, at least a half dozen people turned to glare at him.

"... I'm going to get off the phone now. Before everyone on this train throws me out a window." He said, defeated.

Isumi laughed. *" Probably a good idea. Why don't you call me later?"*

Hikaru worried she'd be late, but fortunately she managed to skid right into the radio station exactly on time. In her experience, there was nothing people hated more than a late idol. It was a perfect excuse to throw the diva card; it was exhausting, really. How she was supposed to be in perfect form at any given hour of the day?

Do people seriously think I just wake up like this? She thought, annoyed, as she ran a brisk hand through her hair, hoping everything was still in place.

Radio shows were forever both a blessing and a curse. Sometimes the hosts were kind and funny, and other times all they seemed to want to do was fish for information when there was no way for it to be redacted before airing. It was a lot like dancing over a hot fire, when that was the case. She'd been fielding those sort of questions a lot more often since management had announced *f(x)*'s breakup. As she had suspected, being without any of her group mates made the experience a lot more harrowing. If she showed even the slightest amount of weakness, she had no one to back her up anymore.

"So, Cy-chan, what sort of secret hidden talents do you have?"

They'd gone through the gamut of her group's touring, her solo album, some of the endorsements she was doing and a few probing questions about any plans to focus more on the Japanese market now that *f(x)* was disbanding. Nothing she hadn't expected and been prepared for. She was still on edge, but her first real interview as a solo artist was chugging along rather smoothly. This was an interesting question, but not a difficult one.

Hikaru paused briefly to let out a quick breath. A softball question. "Hmm.. secret hidden talents... I guess singing and dancing don't count, huh?" She joked.

"Well, everyone knows you're good at that." Taki-san, the radio host, teased back. "I'm talking the fun stuff. Are you secretly a moonlighting mangaka?"

Hikaru laughed. "Absolutely not. I'm happy if my stick figures come out with four limbs."

"Ah, not that then. Do you *Gangnam Drift* ?" He waggled his brow.

"I don't even have a license." Hikaru replied, smiling. The movie had just come out, so it was no surprise he would mention it.

"It was rumored you were supposed to be the lead role opposite Rap Mon- was there a reason you turned it down?"

"Bad timing, unfortunately. Our studio had already planned out the tour dates by the time they asked."

"A shame! I know the fans were really looking forward to seeing you two. You guys are very good friends, right?"

Unfortunately for Taki-san, Hikaru could see these kind of leading questions from a mile away. "Yes, I would say we get along well. And I definitely don't drive, or participate in any kind of street racing- on or off the screen," she segued smoothly. "But, I suppose if I had to say I had a hidden talent, it would be..."

Playing Go.

"I'm very acrobatic." She ended instead, shaking the preposterous thought away. Tossing that out on a whim on a live radio show would be disastrous. "I can do a backflip."

"That's no fun, any one of our listeners could have guessed that, you're a dancer after all!" Taki-san complained.

"Really? It surprised the hell out of my groupmates when I tried it out at practice for our tour. Amber very plainly told me that was an excellent way to accidentally rip my outfit on stage." Hikaru laughed. "She had a good point."

"It would have been great publicity though."

"Not of the good kind, unfortunately." Hikaru nodded sagely.

"So, you can do a backflip. That's not *that* cool; for the record, I can do one too."

"Ah, can you? Do you want to show me right now?" She teased, grinning slyly.

"I will if you will."

"Sorry, not in this outfit." She returned, chuckling.

"Well where's the fun in that? I'm starting to think you're all work and no play, Cy-chan."

He's really pushing for this. Hikaru thought, but didn't let her trepidation show on her face. It was annoying, to say the least. Everything about being an idol was a perfect balance between maintaining the perfect image while still managing to convey a sense of authenticity. If you're too genuine, you can come off as disagreeable. If you're too perfect, you come off as boring. It would be terrible for her image to be seen as either of those things. Despite her inner concern she just returned his probing questions with an easy smile.

"To me, a lot of my play *is* work."

"So you're really telling me you can't do anything besides sing and dance and sometimes do a backflip?"

"I can play the guitar pretty well."

"Well you *are* in the music industry, it's not that surprising."

Hikaru narrowed her eyes slightly. What exactly was he fishing for here?

She racked her brain for something- anything- anything that *wasn't* what he clearly was waiting for her to say.

"I'm a blue belt in Taekwondo." She blurted out, finally, with no small amount of relief.

From the radio host's somewhat disappointed face it was clear her answer was perfectly interesting without actually giving anything juicy away- in other words, a perfect win for her, and a total loss for

him. He was a professional though, so after a few moments he merely covered up his dismay with a plastered over smile.

"Now that is really something! You're surprisingly athletic for an idol, huh?" He grinned, although his cheery disposition rang a little false.

"Comes with all the dancing." She returned, with an equally false disposition of enthusiasm. "It's by and large my favorite part of being an idol- probably the one I'm best at, honestly."

"Really? You were known as one of the stronger vocalists in f(x)."

"Haha~ you think so?"

Back on familiar territory, it seems. Hikaru gave an inaudible sigh of relief, although the tension didn't quite leave her shoulders. It wasn't over until she was done with this segment, had politely shook hands and posed for a few photos, and was in the safety of the back of her car. No, not even then. There were fans on the street who were going to want to take her photo, and fans in the lobby of the hotel who would be too polite to go up and ask for an autograph, but would be watching her closely all the same. There was no *over* for an idol; every moment was *on*, always.

With that thought, she soldiered on through the interview, putting on her best iron smile and nodding along to whatever the host was saying now.

It was a minor blessing in and of itself that this was probably the worst question thrown at her for the whole duration of the interview. She hadn't figured out what it was he'd been fishing for, and by the time she'd performed one of her singles on air for the show and finished up some more predictable questions on her endorsements, she'd given it up as a lost cause. Frankly, she just did not have it in her to care right now. She had stayed out late with Touya the night before, and had to get up early for hair and makeup for a photoshoot in the morning.

It was a few hours later as she was checking back into her hotel and debating falling asleep forever that Yeongha called.

"Acrobatic? What is this nonsense?"

Hikaru was so surprised she couldn't help but break out into heaving laughs. Afterwards, she wiped the tears out of her eyes. "Why on earth were you listening to a Japanese radio talk show?"

"It was on in the cab from Narita." Yeongha replied, cuttingly. *"I didn't have much choice in the matter. Anyway, don't try to get out of this question."*

"What question have you asked me?" Hikaru returned as she waved the card in front of her hotel room door. It opened to a mess of clothing. She was wasted on nice hotels, Hikaru thought silently. Why bother with somewhere so nice if she was just going to ruin it with a bomb of dresses, makeup and shoes?

"You could have just said Baduk. I heard you hesitate like you were thinking about it. Instead you just threw out a whole bunch of junk; guitar? Taekwondo? Seriously" It was just impossible to get anything past Yeongha, wasn't it?

"What?" She retorted, sniffing. "I'll have you know I'm a decent guitarist. And I really am a blue belt- " There was really no point in bringing up the fact that she'd technically stopped practicing when she had been all of seven, "so it's not as if those were lies or anything!"

"But you were thinking about it." He cut in, going in for the kill the moment he saw an opening, as always. *"Why didn't you?"*

Hikaru was silent for a moment, pursing her lips. She stared down at the steel metropolis at her feet, wondering what to say. In the end, she supposed the truth would suffice.

"I don't know how you want me to answer that." She said, stiffly.

" With honesty. Although that can be difficult with you, I suppose."

Hikaru reared back, insulted. "What is that supposed to mean?" She tossed her bag onto her bed with far more force than necessary, angrily plopping onto the bench by the windows. "I'm always honest with you."

" When it suits you. But you have a tendency to deflect or redirect when you don't want to answer something straightforwardly. An appallingly efficient tendency, at that."

Hikaru blinked, frowning out at the Tokyo skyline. "Well, of course I'm good at it. You don't survive in this industry for very long without being very good at evading questions in a manner that comes off casual."

" Yes. A trait that carries very well into your Baduk." Yeongha agreed, to Hikaru's discomfort. *" I didn't mean it in a bad way- quite the opposite, really."*

Yeongha paused, and Hikaru found herself unwilling to break the silence, watching traffic crawl far beneath her.

" I suppose if you'd prefer not to answer, there's not much I can do to change your mind." He grumbled, at length.

Hikaru couldn't help but smile. She could easily imagine his sullen and grumpy face as he seethed in irritation at being thwarted. Yeongha wasn't exactly graceless in defeat or anything, but nothing pissed him off quite like an opponent who effectively maneuvered out of one of his cunning traps. He didn't mind a defeat, but he couldn't handle the idea of someone squirreling out of his hands the moment he springs a trap. It was half the reason Sai loved to bait him into it; he'd pretend like he was going to fall for Yeongha's trap, only to back out at the last moment.

"Honestly, I didn't say it because I wasn't sure how it would go if I did." She confessed, watching the light beneath her turn red, leaving

a flood of foot traffic to crowd the intersection. "I haven't really given it proper thought, so I wasn't about to just throw that out on a whim. I *can't* just throw it out on a whim, do you understand that? I have to consider it carefully and decide whether it fits my 'image' or not."

" *It was a question about hobbies, honestly.*" Yeongha groused, still sounding moody and sullen. " *Does it even really matter that much?*"

"Every answer you give has the opportunity to come back to haunt you if you're not careful." Hikaru replied in response, quoting a favorite saying of one of her instructors. It had only rang truer as she continued on in her career.

" *I suppose you'd know best.*" He conceded, finally. " *And I guess I shouldn't be so surprised you're as cautious in life as you are in Baduk.*"

"There's nothing I hate more than surprises." Hikaru agreed, drily.

" *I'll say. Anyway, will you be there in time for the opening ceremonies tomorrow?*"

Hikaru grimaced. "I don't think so. I have a studio special for most of the day."

" *That's alright. The day after is more important, but we'll be finding out the lineup tomorrow.*"

Hikaru grinned at the thought. "Are you excited?"

" *I can't decide if I would prefer to play Japan first or China.*" Even though he didn't answer directly, Hikaru can hear the pure excitement brimming in his voice. " *Do I want to save the best for last?*"

Hikaru shook her head ruefully. "Don't you think you're underestimating China a bit?"

" Not at all. It's not that I don't think the Chinese first board will be a phenomenal player; I'm merely more excited to play Touya Akira more. It will be my first opportunity to see which of your prodigies is better."

"How many times have I told you to stop saying that?" Hikaru whined, although she knew it was a lost cause.

" Perhaps I'll mention something about it in the opening ceremonies? Everyone already comments on my similar playing style to SAI- I'm sure Touya gets similar remarks."

"Yeongha," Hikaru said reproachfully, rolling her eyes. "You just want to stir up trouble."

" I want to make things interesting, yes." He agreed with relish. " Maybe I will do it; nothing stirs up a passionate debate quite like SAI does."

"Yeongha!" She scolded, but he only continued to laugh.

It was so typical Yeongha to just say what he wanted and do what he wanted just to stir the pot up a little bit. There was nothing Yeongha loved more than spicing things up with a bit of impromptu drama; Hikaru wasn't entirely sure how he could stand it, but it was a trait that Sai mentioned was fairly prevalent in his Go. Just the idea of pulling some of the stunts he did made her hair stand on end; Hikaru was a creature of caution, and Yeongha was the kind of person who liked to throw caution to the wind more often than not.

Not for the first time, she wondered how they always got along so well.

She rolled her eyes again. "Look, cause trouble if you want, but leave me out of it you hear?"

" You? Of course. SAI? I make no promises." He returned cheekily.

At this point, that was probably as good as she was going to get.

Maybe It's Not Our Fault - Yerin Baek

Track 12:

(First Sight)

Heize

.

It was the day before Christmas and Hikaru had a splitting headache.

She ignored it for most of the morning, pushing aside her weariness and such an early start (4am call for hair and makeup) by consoling herself with the thought of seeing Yeongha later in the day. Apparently he'd come early because he'd wanted to see her (read: play an incessant amount of baduk). In all honesty Hikaru was probably just as excited to see him as he was her- it felt like it'd been ages since she'd had the chance to just hang out with him. Maybe she could convince him to leave the baduk board and come with her for ramen or something.

Commercial shoots were always touch and go; sometimes they could get wrapped up quickly, other times they dragged on for a disproportionate amount of time for what would ultimately constitute as a ten second clip. At least Hikaru was well used to these sort of hours, and doing this kind of promotional media alone. She still wasn't sure how she'd fare performing alone for the foreseeable future, but there was really nothing to be done about it.

Despite being Christmas Eve- ostensibly a holiday in some parts of the world- Tokyo was flush with workers going about their usual work day, Hikaru included. It wasn't even really a holiday anyway. At least, not a religious one. But Hikaru remembered faint days with her family on Christmas Eve, happily partaking in Christmas cake. She

could barely remember the memory anymore. Well, she'd be going to her grandfather's on Christmas Day, so she supposed she'd get all her festive spirit out then.

In the meanwhile she still had another appointment to make; a meeting with a rep from Shiseido about her endorsement of them. It's a big deal, so she has to be on her A-game for it, as her manager has called her five times to remind her.

Hikaru downed another vending machine energy drink and somehow managed to plow through it. Successfully. Or at least she was fairly sure. The brand reps seemed quite pleased, even though Hikaru had come out of it less than pleased. They wanted to do a video special about her and her routine (mainly skincare) and a camera crew was going to follow her around for a couple of days. It sounded quite tedious, but fortunately they didn't want to start filming until after the New Year's break so she'd be able to attend the Hokuto Cup without issue.

"What is this 'T- V- special they speak of?" Sai asked once they'd left the building, forever pronouncing foreign words with an adorably confused air.

Hikaru gave a faint smile. *"It's like the regular stuff I do for TV. But instead of having to go to a film lot or location to shoot they're going to follow me around instead."*

Sai tapped his chin with his fan, thoughtful. *"Does that mean they'll be there when we play Go as well?"*

"I haven't really thought about it." Hikaru replied, frowning. *"I hope it doesn't go on for too long; I wasn't planning on playing any Go while they were around."*

Sai did not pout, but Hikaru could tell he wanted to.

"I know. What a wasted opportunity when we could spend the extra days in Japan playing Akira." Hikaru nodded. Hence why she

thought it was quite tedious.

"But is it a good thing? For your career?"

Hikaru blinked, surprised to hear this question from Sai. *"It's a great thing."* She answered, and that was an understatement. It was an incredibly high profile endorsement that could catapult her into international stardom. Or at least in the Asian markets.

Why don't you look more excited for it, then? Sai thought, but found he couldn't find it in him to ask it aloud.

The car was silent as Hikaru seemed lost in thought as she stared out the window; the driver focused on the road, and Sai focused on Hikaru.

Finally Hikaru shook her head, and pulled her gaze away from the traffic outside. *"Anyway, work is done for the day. Should we see where Yeongha is? I think he mentioned he's staying somewhere in Roppongi until the tournament officially starts."*

As soon as she said this, Hikaru jolted upright and reached out to get the driver's attention. "Excuse me, could I get out here?"

He blinked at her. "Are you sure? We're still a couple blocks from the hotel."

Hikaru gave him a winsome smile. "Yeah! I just remembered I wanted to stop in a store at the mall here."

"Do you want me to wait for you?"

Hikaru waved off his concerns. "No, no- I'll take forever trying on clothes! I'll just walk back; it's rare for the weather to be so nice this time of year and I want to enjoy it!"

With such an effortless excuse, the driver had no real reason to protest. It was only after he'd dropped her at the mall entrance that she stopped to wonder why she'd even bothered to lie at all. She

could have just said she wanted to meet a friend for something, or even just admitted she was meeting a friend to play Go. Honestly, it's not as if she was doing something nefarious, or even remotely untoward.

All the same, she really felt as if she should keep this as close to the chest as possible. Maybe Yeongha was right, and she really was just being overly cautious.

The streets were lined with holiday cheer; twinkling lights strung up on the trees dotting the walkways, bright and dazzling hanging displays up and down the corridors, every storefront handsomely dressed for the season. All the families wandering about the mall seemed to be admiring the display as much as they were a part of it—at least, that's how it seemed to Hikaru. There was something as nostalgic to the families holding hands as there was to the whimsical store displays with their candy-colored outfits and tinsel.

Hikaru found herself pausing in the middle of the shopping plaza, bitter wind tangling her hair around her face as she smiled softly at a family across from her.

It was a little girl with her hair up in twin pigtails her father holding her hand as she balanced on the ledge of a fountain. Her mother was in front of her, crouched to snap pictures of the moment.

Hikaru felt as if she might have had a similar moment, somewhere lost in her memories.

She could hardly remember her parents, in all honesty. Her father especially. He'd left when she was so young, she could just faintly remember the shape of his eyes, and the sound of his voice. Her mother was a stronger memory, but most of that had been tarnished by years of distance. Even when they were still living together, it always felt as if she was a thousand miles away. It was no real wonder her mother didn't put up much of a fight when Hikaru insisted on staying in Korea; by that point, they may as well have been two strangers living together.

She shook her head, hard, to get rid of the thoughts. No use dwelling on it now.

Fortunately Yeongha proved ample distraction, replying to her message with a location that happened to be the nearby hotel. Hikaru gratefully entered into the lobby, the warm bubble of air a welcome reprieve from the winter chill outside. Yeongha looked hilariously ill-begotten in the cheerfully decorated lobby with its equally well-dressed inhabitants. He tended to wear the same dark colors and the same style of clothing no matter what the weather, giving him the impression of either a k-pop star with a zealous obsession with his aesthetic, or a kid who just didn't care what he wore at any time of day. Hilariously, it was impossible to say just by looking at him.

Hikaru waved as she ducked past the seating area, catching his attention.

Yeongha scrunched up his nose as she neared. "Why are you so dressed up?"

Hikaru laughed. "It's half of my job to dress up, you know." She pointed out, but then it occurred to her that Yeongha only ever saw her when she was sneaking around during her off-duty time, so he'd never actually seen her in work-mode.

"Is it?" He genuinely seemed confused.

Hikaru rolled her eyes. "Yes, *duh*. " Image is everything, but clearly no one ever told Yeongha that.

He shrugged. "Well whatever. Anyway, the lounge upstairs has a Go board we can use."

"Really? That's convenient!" Hikaru enthused, delighted at the turn of events. She hadn't been looking forward to arguing with Yeongha into going to a salon off the beaten path purely to maintain Hikaru's low profile.

She wasn't entirely sure if this alternative really was all that much better, but at least it was only upstairs. The hotel was the sort of classy establishment that had multiple floors of restaurants and lounges, one of which seemed to be exactly the sort of establishment her grandfather would adore. She had to imagine that was where the Go board was located. True to form, with a thick waft of cigar smoke the two entered into a dimly lit lounge, walking past elaborate whiskey displays to an unused board in the back. Two older gentlemen were engaged in a game on a board in the far corner, gesticulating wildly with cigars and whiskey glasses alike. The fragrant smoke hit her all at once, making her reel back and blink rapidly as a wave of dizziness rushed over her.

"Does the smell bother you?" Yeongha asked, frowning.

She shook her head. "I'll be fine."

His frown deepened. "There's no use playing you if you have a headache." Which was just his way of saying he worried about her health and didn't want to make her play here if it was going to make her feel ill.

She couldn't help but smile at his tone. "How sweet of you to care." She replied glibly, settling into one of the comfy leather armchairs. Anyway, it hardly mattered what sort of shape she was in; Sai was the one playing anyhow. "This is fine though, promise."

He looked skeptical, but was eager enough for a game he didn't fight the issue.

Hikaru hadn't *lied*, persay, but even with the generous ventilation system it was difficult to fight off the pounding migraine that had been plaguing her all day. The smoke, the dim light, and the smell of cigars became somewhat overwhelming. She ended up leaving halfway through the game to grab a glass of water, Yeongha far too engrossed in contemplating his next move to spare it much thought.

Sai kept giving her concerned looks whenever he thought she wasn't looking. She ignored it, at first, but then she played a move and Yeongha looked up at her sharply, which in turn made her look at Sai, who was very casually looking at the ceiling. Yeongha's brow furrowed; Hikaru scowled deeply. Sai merely hid the bottom half of his face with his fan and pointedly ignored her gaze.

"Fine, fine. Just finish this game, and then I'll tell Yeongha I'm going to call it an early night, okay?" Hikaru conceded defeat.

Sai collapsed his fan with a look of approval. *"Very well then- I suppose I should do my best to finish this match up quickly then."*

True to form, Sai seemed to pounce on the opportunity to play Yeongha in earnest. Hikaru got the feeling he normally gave Yeongha more leeway than he would if they were playing in a professional setting. He liked to see what moves Yeongha would make in response to one of his own, how he would approach a certain situation, if he would fall for a trap or find a way out of it- basically, Sai just liked to test him. He never seemed to care much for winning or losing, although he tended to win more often than not. To have Sai actually bring his full focus to a game must be terribly overwhelming, Hikaru thought. She'd only ever seen him do it twice, really. Once when she'd played Akira at the bus stop, and now against Yeongha, who looked like he was about to sweat out of his coat.

A waiter came by to refill their glasses. Yeongha drank all of his in one swift gulp.

"I resign." He said, once he'd set the glass down. "You've been holding out on me." He accused.

Hikaru just shrugged. "Actually, I'm feeling a bit ill and really just wanted some fresh air."

"You... wanted some air." Yeongha repeated, flatly. "You played like *this* because you wanted to go outside?" Did she not realize how

absurd that was- that she could play even better than she currently did, and just didn't do so for some arbitrary reason? But Yeongha had long since learned to just accept the absurdity of Shindou Hikaru and move on.

"Yeah. Don't you think it's a bit stuffy in here?" She replied, glibly.

He scowled at her.

"My head just hurts a little bit. I think it might be the smoke." She added with a sheepish smile.

It was more than enough to get Yeongha to cave. "Fine. I could use some air as well."

They ended up in the shopping center connected to the hotel, the sole travelers braving the weather and wandering around the outdoor paths. Hikaru did feel much better with the first burst of cold air, the light dusting of snow a relief to her head. The Roppongi Hills christmas lights illuminated the path before them; Tokyo Tower rose in the distance like a shining golden beacon, a slow moving crowd of bundled up pedestrians herding towards it. Hikaru was awash in nostalgia at the sight of it, remembering long gone wintry nights spent running around this town in her youth.

"Why don't you play like that all the time?" Yeongha demanded of her, immediately upon exiting the hotel.

Hikaru more or less ignored him. "Mm~ I could really go for some ramen right now. What do you say?"

"Hikaru."

"There's an Ippudo by my hotel. How about we go that way?" She added, cheerfully.

Yeongha stared at her for a long moment, before heaving a dramatic sigh. "Fine, whatever. Lead the way."

Fortunately their hotels weren't too far from each other, and the cold air was rather refreshing.

"Are you excited for your games tomorrow?" Hikaru asked, as they walked.

"How long are you going to ignore my question?" Yeongha retorted, crossly.

Maybe he was right, Hikaru thought, when she recalled him accusing her the other day of intentionally deflecting when she didn't want to answer things. But her answer was honest then, and it still is now; at this point, it's near second nature for her. And she has more reason than usual to want to get out of answering something.

When she still didn't answer, Yeongha stopped and stared at her. Hikaru stopped as well, and stared back. They'd made it to a small park interspersed among the towering steel giants. It was entirely dark in the park, save for the rows of lights ascending around them.

Hikaru stuffed her hands into her pockets, and wondered if she could wait this out.

Yeongha was a lot more stubborn about this than Akira was, she digressed. But that might just be because Yeongha had the opportunity to see her in person more than the other boy did. That, and Akira was usually polite enough to leave her well enough alone when she didn't want to answer something. Yeongha, on the other hand, was exactly the kind of person who had to beat a dead horse just to prove a point. He didn't move around mountains; he somehow managed to make them move around *him*.

"I... I really don't want to talk about it." Hikaru said, after a long moment of silence.

Yeongha was unmoved. "That's really all you're going to say about it?"

"I don't understand why it even matters." Hikaru retorted, waspishly. "I play you, don't I? Why can't we just leave it at that?"

"Because it *does* matter. It doesn't even *make sense*. " He paused. "Nothing about you makes sense, frankly."

Hikaru didn't know if she wanted to laugh or cry.

"You're the best player I know- and that should mean a lot, because you know the caliber of people I play with on a regular basis. I don't think it would be much of a stretch of the imagination to call you the best player of our generation- maybe the best player in the world, currently."

Hikaru's eyes widened in something not unlike wild, unadulterated panic.

Yeongha pressed forward with his offensive. "And yet you seem to actively go out of your way to avoid Baduk in any capacity- won't even *acknowledge* that it exists, let alone that you play it. You *always* change the subject whenever I ask you anything about it that doesn't pertain explicitly to games, like who you learned it from, and when you learned it, or hell, even where you learned it."

This was all true, of course, and only honing in the point that Hikaru had no excuse she could possibly give. Her skills were so strange because they did, quite literally, come out of nowhere.

"You don't understand. Baduk, to me... it's not... it's not realistic." She struggled for words. "I can't rely on it, so I'm better off without it."

Yeongha frowned deeply, confused.

"Rely on it?" He repeated. What on earth did that mean?

She folded her arms, staring out at the park as they walked to avoid his gaze. She was infinitely grateful they were holding this conversation in Korean, so Sai was none the wiser.

"I became an Idol with my own two hands," she said, trying to explain it as best she could. "It's something I did all on my own, you know? No one can take it from me- it's all I have that's *mine*. My brand, my image; fame is fleeting and unreliable, which is why I try to shard to maintain it. But my skills and abilities are something I have faith in, so I know I can handle whatever comes my way."

Go was completely different. Go was...

She faltered midstep.

In the wan park lighting, it was impossible to notice. She managed to catch herself gracefully and continue on as if nothing was amiss. Inwardly though, her mind was racing. Go was unreliable, because it wasn't hers. It wasn't her talent at all- it was entirely Sai. Right now, to the outside world they were the same person... but who's to say how reliable that situation was? Hikaru had built her entire life on what was reliable, and what wasn't. What path was the safest. Sai could leave her just like everyone else in her life had, and then what? Being an Idol was something Shindou Hikaru could claim. That's who she was. But being a Go player? If Sai left her, then she would have nothing.

Hikaru knew better than to rely on anyone else other than herself. It was startling to have to remind herself of that distinction in regards to Sai.

As much as she loved him, Sai was unreliable.

She shook her head. "Baduk, on the other hand... there's no future for me there aside from sadness. So it's better if I keep my distance from it."

Yeongha had no idea what to make of any of this.

He couldn't fathom how she could consider Baduk to be 'unreliable' in any sense. But he also suspected there was more to this conversation than the simple answer he had been hoping for.

Perhaps that was rather obtuse of him, though.

It occurred to him that no one avoided a topic this religiously without intensely personal reasons to do so.

And if that was the case... well, Yeongha was never particularly good at emotional subtlety. He had a feeling he'd accidentally stepped on some kind of emotional landmine, and perhaps it would be better to leave it buried.

Tokyo Midtown was finally in sight, and with it came a wash of city lights. It was night and day from the park they had just walked through. The darkness faded away in a bright splash of neon lights, and Yeongha was able to catch the despondent expression on Shindou's face before she could clear it away. It was as he suspected; this was deeply and truly something Shindou did not want to talk about. For her, it was not a subject to be taken lightly.

So he thought of the first thing he could to distract her.

"... The tree."

She blinked once, twice, and then her brows furrowed in confusion. "Huh?"

He pointed. "Let's go see the tree."

She followed his gaze, to where a great Christmas tree peeked just around the corner of the train station. She was so surprised by the suggestion she went along with it; she normally had to physically haul Yeongha away from the board just to get something to eat, and yet he was voluntarily wanting to do something completely unrelated to baduk right now? Well, best not to look a gift horse in the mouth, and all that.

They walked over towards the grand tree, joining a large crowd of people beneath the towering lights. It really was a magnificent display. She couldn't actually remember the last time she'd seen

one. Well, seen one that wasn't related to some sort of special Christmas event. It was nice to just stand there with the crowds, watching the lights sparkle like a splash of diamonds across the nearby buildings.

Hikar couldn't help but smile.

She knew damn well Yeongha had zero interest in staring up at a giant Christmas tree. But he probably realized this was *exactly* the sort of thing she would enjoy.

Hikaru looked up at him, still smiling. Eventually he noticed, gaze trailing back downwards towards her. He scowled. "What?"

She shook her head, still grinning ear to ear. "It's nothing. Just... thanks."

He shrugged it off, unsurprisingly. "Whatever. Let's go get ramen now?"

She nodded readily. "Yeah."

Track 13:

□□ (NEON)

Yukika

Hikaru skidded to a halt in front of the hotel building, after all but leaping out of the cab. She caught her breath as she waited for the automatic doors to slide open, unsurprised to see all the people in the lobby, even on Christmas day. Then again, it was hardly a holiday here. It certainly wasn't a holiday for *her*.

As she walked into the open expanse of the front desk area, she did her best attempt to look as if she hadn't just all but sprinted over here after her event. She chanced a glance to one of the glass pillars

placed around the room; her hair looked a little windswept, but the hairspray was doing its job.

At the very least, she wasn't in her on stage outfit. She couldn't even imagine how much she would stick out if she was wearing the cute, sparkly dress with all of its ribbons and accessories that she performed in, but she wasn't entirely sure how much better her current outfit was. She changed after performing to host the network's live Christmas day broadcast in downtown Shinjuku, so while it wasn't screaming *Idol on stage*, it was a far cry from the sedated suits around her.

Fortunately no one was paying attention to her, because the first match was already starting: China vs. Japan.

While she thought it would be fun to sit with the main crowd and watch the game with all the spectators, Yeongha had already told her to meet him in Team Korea's room, where they would be watching it as well. Frankly, that was probably the wiser idea. It was a pretty big risk to chance sitting out in the open with all those people- they were a far cry from her usual demographic, but people had been recognizing her more and more lately.

Yeongha, meanwhile, checked his watch for perhaps the tenth time in the past ten minutes, foot tapping impatiently.

"What are you waiting for?" Suyeong asked, confused. "The match already started."

"It's not that." Yeongha returned, distracted.

The younger boy tilted his head. "What is it then?"

He checked his phone again. Nothing. "Shindou was supposed to be here an hour ago."

Suyeong's eyes widened. "C- Cy?" He sputtered. He did a double take around the room, before leaning close to hiss out a frantic; "Cy

is coming here?"

Yeongha rolled his eyes. "This is exactly why I didn't tell you."

Suyeong sputtered, but had no real retort. Kim Ilwhan glanced over to them, but didn't remark on their hushed conversation. An Taeseon-sshi didn't bother with the pretense, looking back at them with an annoyed expression.

"Suyeong, you better be paying attention. We play tomorrow." He said, uncharitably, probably too wary to call Yeongha out but more than happy to do so to Suyeong.

Suyeong sat up a bit straighter, looking sheepish. "Sorry, An-sshi."

He tried to focus on the games being played on the screen in front of him, but found it impossible to do so. He knew he needed to be watching Zhao Shi's game against Yashiro Kiyoharu, as he would be playing both of them soon enough, but now he was just a bundle of anticipation. Now that the shock of knowing Cy, famous Idol and k-pop sensation was coming, he was reminded that Shindou Hikaru was *also* coming, and she always had really great insights into games. She was probably the best player he knew, honestly, although he wasn't going to tell Yeongha that. She tended to just sit and observe games she wasn't playing, as if she just enjoyed being there and watching the scenes unfold; when she did remark on something though, it was always worth listening to. She was very sharp-sighted, especially when it came to reading into the end game.

She also happened to be a very famous pop star.

She tried to open the door as quietly as possible, but in the silence of their team room you could probably hear a pin drop from down the hallway. Everyone looked up at the sound, and Cy herself crept into the room, somehow managing to look both graceful and yet awkward. Her hair was perfectly curling down her shoulders, her makeup was flawless and her skin was all but glowing, and her outfit looked like it probably cost more than this entire hotel. That was a bit

of an exaggeration, but it was not an exaggeration to say she looked picture perfect- probably because she had to be. Suyeong remembered seeing something on twitter about her Christmas day television special.

Kim Ilhawn, their second board, and An Taeseon, their team's sensei, both gave her matching looks of incredulity. Suyeong himself wasn't entirely sure what to say.

Fortunately their first board had no issue breaking the tension. "Oi, Hikaru, there you are. You're late."

Hikaru blinked a few times. "I- sorry. Traffic was horrific."

Yeongha just scowled, returning to his position lounging near entirely slumped in his seat, arms crossed, watching the games with the back of his chair as a headrest.

Hikaru gave a little wave and a hasty bow to everyone else in the room, before taking a seat by Yeongha. Ilhawn and Taeseon still looked as if they were bewildered by her entire existence, both staring at her blatantly. On her part, Hikaru just ignored them with all the aplomb of a queen, turning her attention politely to the screen.

Inwardly, she just didn't actually have the energy to care about what Yeongha's teammates thought of her right now. He'd invited her, she'd accepted, and that was the end of it. If they had a problem with it, they could take it up with him. Right now, she had more important things to worry about, like getting her ears to stop ringing, and the room to stop spinning. She wondered when the last time she'd had a drink of water was- probably something like four or five in the morning, when she was doing hair and makeup. That was pretty foolish of her in hindsight, but between getting rushed onto stage to perform, and then rushed off to host the television show, there hadn't exactly been time for a drink of water, let alone a bathroom break.

She could barely even concentrate on the games, honestly, and that was what she came here to see. Well, that, and to support Yeongha

and Akira and Suyeong, of course.

She discreetly put a hand up to her pounding temple, trying to relieve the ache with pressure. She wasn't particularly successful.

"Ah- it's getting exciting, finally." Yeongha noted. "What do you think, Hikaru?"

Again, everyone in the room turned to stare at her blatantly.

Fortunately, *she* didn't have to be paying attention to answer. She tilted her head to the side.

After a beat, she said, "Lu Li is being quite bold- maybe a bit too aggressive. He must have studied Akira-kun's style extensively, because he's playing a lot like him. The way he answered Akira-kun's tanuki... he could have cut from the left, but instead he went right for the upper right corner. The cut would have been perfectly effective, and that sort of caution could very well have paid off for him later. Overextending himself right here might ruin his chances in the end game- Akira-kun is certainly the kind of player to capitalize on a chance like this, and he's familiar enough with his own style to see it as an echo of his game with Ogata-sensei from the Judan series."

Everyone was still staring at her, but now for entirely different reasons. Even the normally unflappable An Taeson-sshi had on a wide-eyed expression of awe.

Hikaru rubbed her temples. "At any rate, Lu Li seems to be making the *exact* same mistake Akira-kun made against Ogata-sensei; trying too much to mimic a style that isn't his own. I'm unfamiliar with Lu Li's style, so I can't say how he *should* be approaching this match, but from what I know of Akira-kun, he is really playing at his best today. The familiarity to his game with Ogata-sensei won't go unnoticed by him, and I'm sure he has quite a response for it. He's become a much more cautious and thorough player as of late, so big offensive pushes like this against him are a huge risk."

There was a long, offbeat moment of silence.

Suyeong looked around the room. No one was watching the game. They all seemed thoroughly distracted, Hikaru especially, who hadn't even looked up to notice the expressions of everyone around the table; she was still massaging her forehead.

Yeongha chuckled, breaking the tension. He shook his head. "Ah, this is exactly what I like about you, Hikaru."

Suyeong sputtered. He at least, knew Yeongha well enough to realize the teenager threw around comments like this without caring how people would read into it, and knew he was being appreciative of Hikaru purely from an academic standpoint. Kim Ilhwan, however, was darting a scrutinizing look between the two of them, as if he could tell they were dating just by measuring the proximity of their chairs or something. Suyeong face palmed. And of course, this was the moment Hikaru wasn't being her usual observant self, so she didn't realize she needed to make a remark that asserted their position as friends. Hell, if *Suyeong* hadn't known explicitly that Yeongha didn't see Shindou as anything beyond a friend and an excellent baduk player, even he would assume they were dating.

"I'm not your magic eight ball to shake around whenever you have a baduk question, you know." Hikaru grouched, pinching her brow.

Yeongha really laughed aloud at that. "A magic eight ball wouldn't be able to give me such a thorough deduction of each move like you, though."

"In what way?"

"It's never just a move with you- it's a story." Yeongha said, and Suyeong could hear just how much respect and affection he held for her in his tone. "You didn't just recognize Lu Li's push as aggressive; you rationalized the choices that led him to choose the more offensive option, and even in turn inferred how Touya Akira would respond."

"That's just conjecture!" Hikaru protested.

Yeongha rolled his eyes. "I'm not sure if you noticed, Hikaru, but *everything* about Baduk is conjecture."

Hikaru paused, then conceded his point.

She leaned back in her seat, and pretended to watch the game while debating how best to close her eyes without anyone noticing. Sai of course was twirling around the ceiling in pure and utter joy, ecstatic and mesmerized by the games. It was worth it to drag herself across town after her hectic morning just to see the wide, beaming smile on his face.

Suyeong couldn't help but mull over Yeongha's words, once again not paying an iota of attention to the games he really ought to be committing to concrete memory. He was right, *was* the thing. Suyeong had never dissected it so thoroughly, but the way Hikaru observed games truly was so novel in comparison to the bland and perfunctory commentary he usually found in after-game discussions. It was no real wonder Yeongha held her in such high regard.

He could tell even Ilhwan and Taeseon were truly impressed with her, and were no longer laboring under confusion over why she was here. He was fairly sure Yeongha asked her that on purpose, but that didn't make her answer any less exemplary.

As the afternoon wore on, the boards on the screen slowly filled with scrawling patterns of black and white stones, and Hikaru felt as if she was fighting, and conclusively losing, a battle with sleep. Sleep might be too kind a word; apocalyptic exhaustion might be a better word for it. She promised herself to do nothing but rest for the next few days, even if she had to reschedule things with her manager.

She mentally groaned.

That's right, she had *yet another* morning engagement tomorrow. Nothing that required hair and makeup- a minor blessing- but something she had to be ready and alert for nonetheless. This was especially important, because it was a preliminary meeting with the marketing team from Shiseido that she would be closely working with after the break. She had to make a good impression on them. No, not just good, *positively perfect*. They would expect 'good' from an Idol, so she had to be even *better*.

Ok, the next few days, excluding tomorrow.

She was so tired she felt faint, and somewhat nauseous. It was a fight just to keep from listing over onto the floor.

She was definitely the only person in the room not thoroughly absorbed in the games on the screen, though. Everyone else couldn't seem to take their eyes off of it, Sai included, so she could only assume it was really a rather riveting spectacle. Not that she would understand much of it even if she did have the presence of mind to watch it.

Something incredible must have happened, because Yeongha went from slouching in his chair to upright so abruptly he almost pushed his chair out from under him.

"That..."

"Just who *is* their third board, playing a tengen now, of all times?"

Ah, that would be Yashiro-kun pulling one of his crazy moves, then.

Zhao Shi didn't seem like the type to lose his cool over something like that though, Hikaru thought, dazedly, even as she blinked stars out of her eyes. From what Hikaru had heard of him, he seemed impressively level-headed for his age. A lot like her, if she was being honest- a cheery outward disposition with a steely calm beneath.

"- fall for it, you think?" Someone was asking- Yeongha's team lead, she thought.

"Fall for *what*? Was it a trap of some kind?"

"No, more of a mislead, I think."

"Crazy kid..."

"There's not a lot of data out there on him- he's from another of Japan's institute branches. Kansai, I believe."

"What do you think, Hikaru?" Yeongha turned to her, with an expression of excitement that meant he was feeling rather inspired- he was probably going to want a game after this, what with watching everyone else get to play all day. Hikaru felt like collapsing just thinking about it.

Sai was still so glued to the screen he was nearly touching his nose to it, and Hikaru couldn't even work up the mental energy to call for him.

"Yashiro-kun definitely likes to stir the pot." Fortunately, she knew enough about the Kansai native and his play to answer without Sai. "He's even opened on the tengen point before."

Suyeong's eyes widened, both with incredulity and a little bit of apprehension. " *Seriously* ?"

"Yes- and he does do it as a sort of... evaluating move, I believe. That's definitely what he's doing to Zhao Shi right now; he's probably looking to see how Zhao Shi will respond to something so out of the blue, as a barometer to how he'll respond to something he wants to try later on. Probably his critical move in the end game."

"That must be soon then, does he really have the time to pull something like this?" Ilhawn murmured, speculative.

"It does seem a bit contrived." Hikaru agreed. Yashiro was probably feeling intensely pressured by Zhao Shi's unflappable play, and was throwing this out to gauge how reactive he could be with something unpredictable.

"I for one, think he could pull it off." Yeongha enthused. "If he stuck with this, he might be able to shake Zhao Shi."

"It's so reckless!" Suyeong exclaimed, aghast.

Yeongha laughed. "Sometimes you need to be reckless!"

Hikaru felt terrible, but she really was sort of hoping he would be overly reckless, and then maybe lose the game in the next ten minutes so she could leave and go to sleep. Waya-kun and Wang Shizhen were just about at that mark already. Sai had already made noises that Waya-kun should have resigned a few hands earlier, but Hikaru understood that it could be difficult to reconcile a loss in the heat of the moment. The despair, the panic, knowing everyone is watching you and you're on the stage... she definitely understood.

"At least it's an interesting match." Ilhwan commented, idly. "Lu Li's sweating buckets over on the first board."

Taeseon nodded. "Yes, Hikaru-sshi was correct; he overextended himself in the beginning, and it ended up costing him critically in the end game."

Suyeong grinned. It looked like his sensei's ambivalent attitude towards Cy had definitely done a one-eighty since she walked in the room. How could he have ever doubted the greatness of f(x)'s darling unni? The fanboy in him was particularly smug.

Cy herself seemed surprised, but pleased. She smiled back at him. "A hunch that paid off."

"It's not a hunch when it's always right." Yeongha retorted, drily. "Anyway, Lu Li should probably just resign, and so should Japan's

second board. Their third is putting up an interesting fight though. Say, Hikaru, do you think Zhao Shi will go for the pincer on the bottom left star point, or continue to push for the upper right?"

There was a long pause. Long enough for Yeongha to turn around. "Hikaru?"

She was holding a hand to her head again, brow scrunched up. "I-sorry. I think I need some air."

Yeongha frowned deeply, as she excused herself and quietly left the room. No one else seemed to make any note of it, but he had noticed her do something similar last night.

He glanced back at the screens, and then resolutely decided to follow her.

The song the chapter is named after, Maybe It's Not Our Fault by Yerin Baek is one of my favorite k-pop songs - maybe favorite song ever tbh. If you haven't heard her voice, it's positively breathtaking. Hikaru's next 'album' is 10/10 going to be based off of her "Every Letter I Sent You" lol

Across the Universe - Yerin Baek

Thank you to everyone who left such encouraging reviews! I read every single one, even though ffnet makes it such a hassle to reply -.- This is honestly such a wonderful fandom to come back to, and I appreciate each and every one of you!

Track 14:

JUST U 가 (prod. GROOVYROOM)

Jeong Sewoon ft. Sik-K &

Waya Yoshitaka woke up on the first day of the Hokuto Cup with a vaguely unsettled feeling.

He had a very odd and bewildering dream about Touya's girlfriend, which was already a bad sign, and beyond the fact he was dreaming about someone else's girlfriend the contents themselves were also very bewildering. He went to one of her concerts with Ochi of all people, the both of them entirely decked out in her fan attire. Ochi and Waya proceeded to argue over who was the better fan, and then they both simultaneously decided to compete for her affections via Go. Cy refused to even play them. She insisted, in fact, that she didn't know how, and seemed confused as to why they would even believe she could. The dream ended as they got kicked out by security. The last thing he remembers was Cy turning to them with a rueful smile, then walking on stage.

Waya supposed he did this to himself; he had, after all, wasted at least three hours of his life last night digging through Cy fan websites. The majority of the information was way too in-depth, frankly, and made him feel like a creep. Did he *really* need to know what product she used in her hair, or wild speculations on whether

she preferred chanel or gucci? He really ought to be focusing on his matches for tomorrow.

It had helped him fall asleep, at the very least.

Still, he felt wholly unprepared for the day. Despite beating out Ochi for second board, he didn't feel confident in his abilities at all. As much as he disliked Touya for being such an annoyingly unflappable player, it was very obvious how Waya and Yashiro compared. Touya was... light years ahead of them. From the way he approached the games, to the way he met everything Waya and Yashiro dished at him head on- the distinction between his level of skill and his amount of experience in high-stakes games was readily apparent. If anything, it had only managed to make Waya feel *worse*. It didn't help that even the loud-mouthed Yashiro conceded to Touya too.

The most constructive conversation they had without Kurata-sensei in the room had been when Touya's girlfriend had hung out with them. Yashiro and Waya simply didn't feel as if they could argue with Touya- even when it was clear there was a better perspective than his. Kurata-sensei was more of his peer than Waya and Yashiro were, so he had no issue pushing back against him. And between Touya and Cy... well, Touya very clearly held her opinion in incredibly high regard. And in his defense, it hadn't seemed unwarranted; no matter what opinion he had, she had a counter to it that was both perfectly reasonable and entirely different than his. Her perspective had been refreshing.

Waya sighed, shaking his head.

Here he was, thinking about her. *Again*.

Even after two cups of coffee in the hotel lobby, he still felt a bit out of sorts. He could see Isumi's tall figure over the milling crowds- presumably with Nase, Saeki and Ochi in tow- and wished he could go over and talk to them, if only to settle his nerves. But instead he was stuck here with the babbling Kurata-sensei, the unsettled and fidgety Yashiro, and the ever impassive Touya.

They were all eventually ushered into the room for some photos and PR, where Waya caught his first glance at the other teams.

He was relieved to see they all looked just about as uncomfortable in their formal suits as he did. With the exception of a boy around his age on the Korean team, with wild auburn hair, a disinterested expression, and a sleepy slouch that spoke of blatant disregard to the situation at large. By his side was a shorter boy who appeared to be around Ochi's age, who looked like he was trying very hard to maintain a rather unforgivingly rigid posture, as if in compensation for the boy next to him. The last member, a very tall boy with glasses, looked about as impassive as Touya did. Team China was more or less identical to Team Japan; their first board was unflappable, their second looked uncomfortable, and their third was fidgety and restless.

Waya had, honestly, sort of brushed the Hokuto Cup off as cool but inconsequential in the grand scheme of things.

It wasn't as if an actual title lay dangling at the end of this- there was no real recognition to it. It wasn't an official title, so it wasn't an official match, so as far as Waya had been concerned, it wasn't worth the same kind of effort as his other league matches.

He had vastly underestimated the situation.

It might have been just a bunch of marketing fluff at the end of the day- just a couple of big companies badgering for sponsorship- but that didn't negate the level of pressure the press had created around the event. There were hundreds of people in the lobby, way more spectators than even a title league match, and there had to be at least two dozen magazines and editorials in the room looking for questions and interviews. Waya had never done an interview in his *life*. What was he supposed to say? He looked wildly towards Kurata-sensei- why hadn't he given them a pep talk about that, at the very least?!

Akira, meanwhile, had resigned himself to this fate ages ago.

He was no stranger to interviews at this point. His father's infamy had always made the spotlight squarely centered on him. It was annoying, but familiar territory.

He wasn't all that interested in the press. He could tell from the wide-eyed looks Waya and Yashiro were casting towards all the cameras that they were horribly ill-prepared for such a fate, but Akira had assumed this would be the case from the moment he'd gotten wind of the Hokuto Cup at all. He couldn't imagine it to be anything *less* than a giant publicity stunt, frankly. He was well aware how much sponsorship money had been thrown at this thing. All the same he'd agreed mainly because he believed in the cause, despite all the hassle; this was an excellent opportunity to get more people involved in Go. Especially people his age and younger- the future of the game. As tedious as he found such things, he understood how important it was. Beyond that, he was well aware of his own role in the Go world. As the leader of Japan's so called 'new generation', he had a lot of pressure on him to not only set a good example, but to be the fresh new face on what was rapidly becoming an aging game.

This in and of itself was more than enough reason for Akira to agree to participate, despite his already hectic tournament schedule.

But aside from this important mission, he couldn't really say he was interested in anything else.

Or at least, that used to be the case.

Now, he was *far more* interested in the other boy across the room from him fighting off a wide yawn, than he was the cameras, the other team, or the entire spectacle around him at large.

It was his first time seeing Ko Yeongha in person- the boy behind the ubiquitous *baduk0* handle online. Not that Akira could blame him, when he himself had gone for the ambiguous and totally uninspiring *player1*. The younger boy by his side was probably *krystal14*, then.

Hikaru had mentioned being friends with him, that he was third board, *and* that he was actually a big fan of her group, so he couldn't imagine it being anyone else.

He'd never played either of them online, although he'd watched plenty of their games. No doubt they'd done the same for his games. That wasn't all that surprising; *everyone* on their private server always logged in to catch one of SAI's games, no matter who SAI was playing. He played Hikaru often enough, once a week on average, but not to the same degree those two did. Akira had no one to blame but himself for that, though. He knew Hikaru would happily agree to more games if Akira had just summoned up enough courage to ask her for more, but to be honest he always felt guilty for eating up her time like that. On the other hand, Ko Yeongha definitely didn't share his concerns.

He was sure China's first board was nothing to scoff at, but all the same he couldn't manage to spare the other boy a thought. Most of his energy was entirely focused on Ko Yeongha- he was a little mystified with himself, to be honest.

He'd never been so excited to play someone before. Not even Hikaru.

He was always happy to play Hikaru, to be sure. But for some reason, the idea of playing her didn't give him the same anticipatory sensation that playing Ko Yeongha did. If anything, playing Hikaru was a lot like playing his father; it was an opportunity he relished and enjoyed, but it always felt more like... well, like an invaluable learning opportunity more than anything. Hikaru was an endless wellspring of knowledge, and Akira always felt humbled to be able to witness her unfolding wisdom in person. But frankly, he'd given up on the idea of ever actually besting her. Akira and Hikaru were not equals across the battlefield, in the same way Ko Yeongha and Hikaru weren't equals, either.

But Touya Akira and Ko Yeongha, on the other hand...

Yes, he decided, resolutely. That was the difference.

Ko Yeongha was not just a worthy opponent. Ko Yeongha was *his rival*.

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Across the room, Yeongha was contemplating a similar analogy.

This was Touya Akira, after all, Japan's star prodigy- and SAI's first pupil. Touya had played Hikaru far before Yeongha did; unfortunately any and all games they had played were unofficial, so Yeongha wasn't privy to the specifics. But Yeongha could see the aftermath in the games that *were* official. Touya played extraordinarily well in the months that followed, to the point he even qualified to play in the Oza title match, beating out regular juggernauts in the main tournament. Yeongha had made sure to study his kifu intensely; his first game was really subpar, but he put up a far more valiant effort in the remaining games. Winning two out of seven against a titan like Zama-Oza was nothing to scoff at, even if it was ultimately a loss.

Nothing less than he would expect from a rival, Yeongha thought, with relish.

He hadn't been joking with Hikaru earlier when he'd described them both as SAI's prodigies. They were certainly the two who played her the most, and beyond that, were the only ones who regularly interacted with her in real life. Playing a few games against speed demon SAI was something everyone on their server had the opportunity of doing. But only he and Touya, and to an extent Suyeong, had the benefit of being able to pick apart the game afterwards with her. SAI was notorious for leaving the moment a game was over, without any comment whatsoever on the match. Yeongha knew, of course, that this was because Hikaru often just didn't have the time to type out comments when she was out and about. Everyone else was left to speculate if SAI just didn't believe

the others were worthy of such wisdom, or perhaps didn't even know how to use a western keyboard, or maybe just didn't have the time.

More to the point, Hikaru usually had nothing to say but positive comments and the occasional constructive feedback when it came to the other pros on his server. She considered them good opponents, and she was too polite to say anything else about them. But it was readily apparent that she held Touya- and himself- in higher regard.

Yeongha was specifically interested in seeing if he was actually worthy of such regard.

By the time the photo-ops were done, Yeongha's boredom had extrapolated tenfold, and he was beginning to get annoyed. He wanted to know the lineup; he didn't care about anything else. All this pandering was exactly the sort of thing he hated. Why were they even bothering with interviews? Was he supposed to just say flattering- and completely incorrect- nonsense about the other players just because it was the nice thing to do? It was obnoxious, to say the least.

"What are you most excited about in this tournament, Ko Yeongha-nim?"

Yeongha roused himself out of his musings at the question, translated into Korean by their translator. Everyone on his team, including the team lead An Taeseon, were giving him looks of trepidation. They were definitely expecting him to say something blasphemous.

He almost wanted to give it to them, if only to make things more exciting.

In the end though, it felt rather contrived. Who knows, maybe Hikaru was rubbing off on him, but he was more inclined to take the path of least resistance than he was to stir up trouble.

All the same, he intended to be honest.

"I am most excited to play Touya Akira," he said into the microphone, expression rather bland considering such a bold statement.

An Taeseon-nim's eyebrow twitched. "Try to say something nice about China next time too," he hissed under his breath.

Yeongha just shrugged.

" Ah, Touya Akira! He is quite a good player. Why are you most excited to play him, in particular?" The Japanese announcer asked, excited.

The translator turned it over towards the team. "Touya Akira-nim is a good player, but why him?"

Yeongha grinned roguishly. "He's my rival."

The translator didn't so much as blink as he relayed it back. The crowd lit up with murmurs. Even Touya himself broke his indifferent expression with a look of surprise.

The host turned to Touya; "What do you think, Touya-san?"

To Touya's credit, he answered evenly; "I am also quite eager to play Ko Yeongha-san. I also believe Lu Li-san will be challenging."

Well, he was definitely more diplomatic than Yeongha, that was for sure.

It was amusing, really, considering the other boy's style. Yeongha hadn't expected him to be so- well, polite. He was just as ruthless and aggressive as Yeongha. He couldn't help but wonder *why* Hikaru had gravitated towards both of them- two people with completely different styles to her. It was a good match though, he had to admit; playing so often with someone with such a different style than him had done wonders for his own abilities- he was sure Touya had benefited similarly.

All the more reason to want to play him.

Waya looked wildly between the two first boards sitting across the stage from each other, wondering what was going on here.

Sure, it was normal to want to compete against other players across the world, but why had Ko Yeongha singled out Touya like this? Waya scowled. Wait, what is he even saying- because he's *Touya*, of course. Everyone always looks at him like he's god's gift to the Go world or something. Is it any real surprise that his infamy has made it to Korea?

"- consider him your rival as well, Touya-san?"

Waya pulled himself out of his annoyed musings, curious over what Touya's answer would be. He looked rather put on the spot, but was doing his level best not to show it.

Waya couldn't be any more correct.

Touya wasn't entirely sure how to respond. He couldn't help a fleeting thought of sympathy for Hikaru- is this how she felt all the time? She was inundated with interviews and talk shows all the time. He hadn't realized how nerve-wracking they could be; not unlike a game of Go, honestly. Answering appropriately was all about reading the host's mind; what were they looking for, and what would you give them in response? It was no wonder she was so good at Go, then.

He knew the answer: yes, he considered Ko Yeongha his rival.

But was what really the best way to answer this question?

He had a feeling Hikaru could have found her way out of this mental rat maze. Akira was far less rehearsed in such nuanced mind games though, so he just answered simply; "Yes."

The crowd roared with murmurs again. Kurata-sensei gave him a surprised look. As did the rest of his team. Akira couldn't exactly say anything to them currently, not that he would want to anyway. He wouldn't know how to explain this without *also* having to explain

Hikaru's existence, which was... a subject he wouldn't even know how to approach in the delicate manner it warranted.

Once again, it appeared Yeongha didn't share his compunctions whatsoever.

"Have... you two played each other before then?" The host asked, just as surprised as everyone else both in the crowd and on the stage.

Akira hesitated, unsure how to approach the question.

"We both play SAI on the same server, and while neither of us have won against SAI, I'm interested to see how we will match up against each other officially."

There goes that secret, Touya thought, resigned.

The host sat up straighter at the mention of SAI. The photographer began to furiously snap photos, as voices rose from the crowd like the swell of a tide- not even bothering with the pretense of trying to keep the noise level low. Again, both Yashiro and Waya did a double take in his direction. Akira had to wonder if this Ko Yeongha was intentionally stirring up drama- why bother to mention SAI, otherwise? Nothing stirred up controversy in the Go world quite like the notorious netgo player did.

"Oh, amazing! So you both are part of the private server that hosts Sai? Last I heard, was it not technically owned by Sung Jinwoo-nim, the current Chunweon?"

"It is," Ko Yeongha drawled in response.

The host leaned forward. "That is then, to infer, that Sung Jinwoo-nim knows SAI personally?"

Akira was very relieved these questions were directed at Ko Yeongha and not him. And frankly, it appeared Ko Yeongha had no

issue answering them either. "I didn't say that," the Korean pro pointed out. "And at any rate, are these questions not a little off topic?"

The host looked chastised, but looked as if he wanted to continue to push the issue. In the end though, he just turned around and began to pepper the Chinese team with some fairly routine questions. Both the host and the crowd looked dismayed with the boring, but perfectly reasonable turn of events, and Akira couldn't help but breathe a small sigh of relief.

"Touya Akira plays against SAI ?" Ochi looked both bewildered and incensed. "How is that any fair?"

Isumi looked down at the boy by his side and gave an amiable shrug. "I don't really think it's a question of being fair or not." He pointed out, mildly.

On his other side, Saeki gave a loud sigh. "How did he manage to get on that server? That Sung Jinwoo won't accept anyone!"

"And why *Touya* of all people?" Ochi added, outraged. "Why isn't anyone else allowed to join?"

Isumi thought they were all forgetting what 'private server' really meant. As he saw it, who the current Chunweon did or didn't want to invite was entirely his business. That SAI happened to join what was already an exclusive group was just adding fuel to the fire, though. He was vaguely interested to know, but he also didn't put that much stock in SAI. It's not that he didn't think the elusive netgo player wasn't anything short of impressive- it just felt weird to him to play someone he knew so little about. Part of the reason he liked Go so much was that it was such an intensely personal game between two people; you could read so much into another person's thoughts and feelings just by sitting across the goban from them. All of that was conclusively taken away in netgo. He knew some people favored the anonymity, though.

Around the lobby, everyone seemed to be on the same topic as Ochi and Saeki. Quite a few spectators were bemoaning how unfair it was that both Ko Yeongha and Touya Akira got to play SAI on a regular basis- others were doing the same as Isumi, and pointing out that it wasn't really a question of fairness. People were debating the merits of having a private server at all, which Isumi thought was just ridiculous. Of course pros would like to play each other online; and a whole, playing a professional without being one yourself is usually a difficult endeavor and costs money to begin with, why would they expect such an event to be free and accessible just because it was online?

"Isumi Shinichiro!"

Isumi jumped on instinct. No one used that tone of voice on him but his mother. He half expected to see her towering, scary form when he turned around. Instead it was Nase Asumi, looking out of breath and like she had a serious bone to pick with him.

He looked at her, perplexed. "Did you run all the way from the subway?" He thought she'd mentioned something about having an appointment earlier today and being a bit late to watch the games.

"Nevermind that." She dismissed, marching up to him to poke him in the chest. "Why did I have to find out from *Waya* of all people that Cy would be attending today?"

"SAI?!" Both Ochi and Saeki cried, in unison.

Nase blinked at them, surprised.

"Not *that* SAI," Isumi clarified hastily. "She's talking about *Cy-chan*, the idol from f(x)."

Ochi wrinkled his nose. " *Huh?* "

Meanwhile, Saeki looked like he'd swallowed his own tongue. " *What?!'*" If possible, his shriek had gotten even louder. His friends

quickly shushed him before he could draw the attention of the milling crowds.

"What do you mean, Cy-chan? *The* Cy-chan?" He hissed, eyes wide.

"Yes, *the* Cy-chan." Nase repeated, with emphasis. "Do you know any other idols named Cy?"

"What is this nonsense about idols?" Ochi interrupted, folding his arms.

"Yeah, apparently she's friends with Touya Akira-"

"Waya said they were dating," Isumi remarked, surprised.

Nase just rolled her eyes, *hard* . "Oh please, as if Waya would know the meaning of that word. Anyway, that's a terrible rumor to be spreading around if it isn't true."

"Fair enough." Isumi agreed. This was exactly why he had kept it to himself in the first place.

Saeki, meanwhile, appeared to be hyperventilating. "She's coming? *Here* ? Oh god, I should have worn something nicer than this..."

"I... *really* don't think you need to worry about that, Saeki-kun." Nase said, mildly, trying to find a polite way of pointing out that there was no way Cy was going to care about that, much less even give them a second glance.

She herself was rather floored with the situation though, to be fair. And she'd had a similar freakout to Saeki earlier when Waya had broke the news to her. He'd said she'd gone to Touya's *house*, and seemed like she'd been there before! He insisted they were totally dating, but then when she'd pressed him for further evidence he got all shifty. He just mentioned that they called each other by their first names, and argued kind of like an old married couple. Nase pointed out that they could very well just be childhood friends or something,

and beyond that, she and Waya argued like an old married couple too, and that was hardly evidence of a relationship. Waya had begrudgingly conceded her point, but still insisted they were totally dating.

Nase wasn't going to entirely dismiss the issue; after all, she had gone to watch his Oza title match. Honestly Nase despaired for herself- how did she not realize she had been in an elevator with Cy-chan, of all people? She even told her to just call her Hikaru-chan! How crazy was that? Her song *Why* was Nase's number one played song of the year! Then again, she had been wearing a face mask. Nase was still in awe how effective those things actually were at concealing someone's identity; no wonder all the idols used them. And, well, she'd also been a bit distracted by her amazing outfit.

Anyway the point was, if Touya told them later on that he and k-pop star Cy were, indeed, dating, she wouldn't be surprised to hear it. But if they hadn't confirmed it, then Nase was not going to assume. She knew enough about the world of idols and gossip rags to realize how dangerous that could be.

"I didn't realize you were such a fanboy, Saeki." Isumi remarked, with a laugh.

Saeki flushed, but didn't bother to deny it. "Look, she's got a great voice okay." He defended, meekly. "And I really like her personality. She always livens up the game shows, and nothing ever seems to phase her. She's always got some cool and clever response no matter what the hosts throw at her, you know? Like, on *Kanto Pop Radio* the other day the host kept asking her all this crazy stuff and she totally sailed through all of it-

"Yes, he is *clearly* a fanboy." Ochi interrupted, smirking.

Saeki just huffed, and crossed his arms. "Whatever." He muttered, flustered.

"Hey now, that's nothing to be ashamed of, I'm a pretty big fan too." Nase chimed in, if only because she felt a little bad for Saeki. "I love her taste in fashion, and she really does have an amazing voice. I'm hoping now that she's launching her solo career we'll get to hear more of it; it's always hard to show that off when you're in a group without seeming like you're stealing the spotlight."

"Right?" Saeki agreed, excitedly. "Don't get me wrong, I love f(x), but Cy was always my favorite. And not just because she's Japanese and she releases a lot of stuff over here."

"I like all of them." Nase nodded along. "I'm definitely going to follow all of them in their solo careers."

"Can we *please* stop talking about idols now?" Ochi butted in, looking as if he had been done with this conversation from the moment it started. "Who cares if she's here or not? We're all here to watch the matches right?"

"Right." Saeki conceded, looking chastised.

Even Nase appeared caught off guard by her own excitement, clearing her throat. "Yes, let's. It's Japan and China first, right? I'm sure it'll be exciting."

"Err- excuse me. Did you just mention the Japan and China game? For the Hokuto cup, right?"

Nase whirled around, surprised to see a girl her age with auburn hair tied up into twin pigtails. Behind her were a group of girls also around their age; Nase noticed after a beat that they were all wearing the same uniform. That's right- today was the first day of winter break for schools, right? These girls must have just gotten out of the annual announcements.

"Yes, that's right. We were just about to head in- the matches should start soon." Nase explained.

"Oh good," the girl looked relieved. "I was worried we'd be too late."

"Nope, just in time." Nase smiled. "Would you like to join us?"

"Really?" The auburn-haired girl blinked in surprise. "That would be great, thank you! I'm Fujisaki Akari, by the way."

"Nase Asumi." Nase responded in kind. "And this here is Isumi Shinichiro, Ochi Kosuke, and Saeki Koji."

"It's great to meet you, Nase-san, and thanks again!" One of the girls came up from behind Fujisaki. She was really quite pretty, with long, curly chestnut hair tossed up in a high ponytail. "I'm Imai Lisa, and this is Uehara Himari and Hazawa Tsugumi. We're all first years at Kaio Academy." Behind her, the one with long, straight pink hair gave a friendly wave; the shorter one with a cropped bob of brown hair shyly hid behind her friend, but waved all the same.

"Kaio?" Isumi repeated, intrigued. "Are you all in the Go club, then?" That was the school Touya Akira went to, if he recalled correctly. He remembered they also had a pretty incredible Go club, as far as amateur leagues went.

The other two, Uehara Himari and Hazawa Tsugumi both began to laugh sheepishly. Imai-san was fighting off a smile. Fujisaki-san coughed delicately. "Ah, actually, they uh... don't really like us much."

The tall brunette rolled her eyes. "They think we're stealing Touya Akira from them, which is ridiculous because a professional would hardly join a school Go club to begin with."

Nase blinked in surprise. "Oh! So you all are... friends of Touya Akira then?"

"Touya-kun teaches us Go at lunch!" The pink-haired girl, Uehara, revealed.

Nase, Ochi, Saeki and Isumi all stared blankly at her, stunned into silence.

The brunette behind her peeked over her shoulder to add, quietly. "Err- well, he *tries* to teach us. We haven't made much progress."

"Hey, I play tsumego pretty well now!" Himari interrupted, hands on her hips.

Fujisaki laughed. "That would make one of us, then."

"We really just connive him into hanging out with us at lunch whenever he's in class." Imai Lisa revealed, conspiratorially. Then she flashed a winsome smile; the kind that could bring a lesser man to his knees. "We came here to support him."

"Yep!" Uehara agreed, brightly. "Ganba, Touya-kun~!"

Nase was the first to recover. "Ah, that's really nice of you guys to come out on your first day of break to support him! They should be getting started soon, why don't we go find seats?"

Track 15:

□ □ □ (Be by my side)

Crush (□ □ □)

Hikaru exited the bathroom with an annoyed expression, looking around the vast hallway and wondering how she was supposed to make her way back to Team Korea's viewing room. Her expression of irritation was well warranted; why did she have to have her cycle now, of all times? No wonder she felt so terrible, she was probably way more dehydrated than she originally thought, and now on top of that she was having cramps. Lovely.

" *How's he doing, Sai?*" She asked, as she stood in the hallway.

Sai wasn't floating through walls to watch Go games like usual, though. Instead he was hovering over her shoulder, frowning. "*I think the better question is, how are you doing?*"

Hikaru gave him an exhausted smile. "*Oh, it's that time of the month, if you know what I mean. I'm going to take it easy soon, don't worry.*"

That didn't stop Sai from worrying at all.

In fact, he was worrying even *more*. He knew Hikaru's schedule for the next few days- her grandfather was expecting her later today for some sort of party, and after that she had something in the morning tomorrow again. And then she would be watching Yeongha's game against China for the rest of the day. It never felt as if Hikaru ever had a moment to just relax. And if she did, they were always painfully brief. It reminded him so much of Torajiro it hurt to think about, sometimes. As his fame skyrocketed, the Honinbo was constantly being pulled in every direction by people who never seemed to give any care for his health.

"Hikaru,"

The voice startled them both.

"Yeongha," Hikaru said, surprised. "What are you doing out here? Are the games over?"

"No," he said shortly, and then; "What's wrong with you?"

Hikaru reared back, a flush crawling up her neck. "What? Nothing's wrong with me!"

Yeongha looked just as unconvinced as Sai felt. "Yesterday I thought it was just the smoke bothering you, but that can't be the case today. Are you sick?"

"It's nothing like that," she insisted weakly, as even the tips of her ears turned red.

Before she could reel back, he leaned forward and pressed their foreheads together. "You don't seem warm to me." He noted, mildly.

Hikaru leapt backwards lightning fast. "Warn me before you do that, would you?" She gasped, hand to her chest. "What if I was contagious or something?"

Yeongha didn't look worried in the least. "I haven't been sick in years."

That was totally not the point. But why was Hikaru even surprised at this point? Yeongha either had no social awareness or, more likely, just didn't even remotely care about them.

He tilted his head then, crossing his arms. "You looked like you were about to faint in there."

"It... was a near miss." Hikaru admitted, honestly. She just didn't have it in her to lie right now.

Yeongha's expression turned from his usual look of vague irritation at the world at large, to something more concerned. "That's not normal." He pointed out, at length.

"I'm probably just dehydrated and low on iron." She revealed, running a wary hand through her hair.

"That is *also* not normal." He noted, frowning.

Hikaru smiled at him wryly. "Uh... well, it is when you're a girl, if you know what I mean."

He blinked once, twice, and then his eyebrows shot up in recognition. She expected him to look somewhat embarrassed and uncomfortable at the situation, but instead he seemed to take it in stride.

"Come with me for a moment," he said, and walked down the hall. Intrigued, she followed him.

They ended up at a dead end, with a few benches lined up against the wall, a couple vending machines, and a side exit propped open with a door stopper, a small porch beyond it. There was an overflowing ashtray by the door, and the ground was littered with cigarettes. A smoker's haunt, then. Yeongha ignored all of that, propping the door open wide to let in the cool outside air, and then turned towards the vending machines opposite the benches.

"Sit," he said, as he leaned down and popped a few coins into the drink machine.

Hikaru was still too surprised to argue, plopping down onto the bench. The machine rattled, and then a bottle dropped into the dispenser. Yeongha tugged it out and handed it to her; a *pocari sweat*.

She grimaced.

"What?" He said, annoyed.

"The calories." She complained.

"The *electrolytes*." Yeongha retorted, unmoved.

Hikaru sighed, she supposed he was right. Although added sugars were exactly the sort of thing she was supposed to be actively avoiding. Without further ado she popped the cap open, and proceeded to down almost the entire bottle. She gave a sigh of relief as she came up for air; she wasn't sure if it was the cold air or the hydration, but she was feeling better already.

"Thanks," she said, belatedly.

Yeongha shrugged. Hikaru fought off a smile; he didn't bat an eyelash at the thought of a menstrual cycle, but looked deeply

perturbed at the idea of a bit of gratitude. How typical Yeongha.

"My mom used to always drink those when she had hers." He remarked, and Hikaru looked up in surprise.

Yeongha never mentioned his mother. Or either of his parents, honestly. Well, glass houses and all that. Hikaru wasn't exactly all that forthcoming on the issue either.

"I feel better already," Hikaru said, smiling gratefully. Her smile fell after a beat. "I'm sorry you're missing the end of the games."

Yeongha just shrugged, leaning against the door, head tilted out into the sunshine. "They're probably already done." He said. "And anyway, we'll be going over them for *hours* after this."

Hikaru grimaced at the thought. Those after-game discussions were intense. She understood why they were so important- arguably, even, more important than the game itself- but that didn't make it any less strenuous to sit through.

The two looked up when there was a clattering noise from behind the corner.

After a beat two new figures emerged at the mouth of the hall; a man in an impressively flashy white suit, and an older gentleman in more traditional wear, holding a cane. Both had a pack of cigarettes in their hand. Hikaru blinked, registering the taller man as familiar. But where had she seen him before?

"Ah, excuse us." The old man said genially, as he made for the smoker's door.

Both Yeongha and Hikaru dipped their heads politely as he passed. The taller man nodded in their direction as well, before pausing.

"Hey, you..." He narrowed his gaze at her, puzzled. "You're- Akira-kun's friend, aren't you?"

Oh that's right! How could she have forgotten that suit?

"Oh yes, yes I am!" Hikaru replied. "It's nice to see you again, Ogata-Judan-sensei!"

He looked so surprised she remembered him, and further, even knew his title.

There was a chortling laugh from the open porch. The older man looked to be amusing himself at Ogata's expense. "Haha, Seiji-kun, you look like you're not used to being so well respected! Don't you know how old you are these days?"

Ogata's brow twitched. "And exactly how old do you think I am, old man?"

"Well, it's natural for the younger generation to pay respects to their elders, is it not?" Hikaru cut in cheerfully,

"Right you are, young lady! But you should know, your generation is not normally as polite as you are." The wily old man gave another hearty laugh.

Ogata eyed her critically. "Did you come out here for a smoke as well?" He held out his pack of cigarettes.

Hikaru could have laughed at the very thought. Smoking was a great way to ruin her vocal chords. She held her hands up apologetically. "Oh, no thank you, I don't-

"I'll take one if you don't mind, thanks." Yeongha interrupted her, and Hikaru watched in wide eyed disbelief as he not only took a cigarette out of the man's pack, but also his lighter when he offered it.

Ogata started at him in surprise. "You're Ko Yeongha, right? Korea's first board?"

Yeongha nodded along as he lit the end of his cigarette, making a vague sound of affirmation as he did so.

Ogata tilted his head. "You speak Japanese?"

He nodded again, and then after a quick drag handed the lighter back to Ogata.

"Why use the translator then?"

Yeongha took another drag and shrugged. "Seemed impolite not to, if he was already there."

Ogata scrutinized him closely. "So, you really think of Touya Akira as your rival?"

Hikaru stared at her friend as if he'd grown three heads. " *You do ?* Since when?"

Yeongha looked away, shrugging again. It was hard to see his expression behind his unruly auburn hair. Hikaru squinted at him. Was he *embarrassed* right now?

"He said they were rivals because they both play SAI." Ogata revealed. Hikaru felt as if her hair was standing on end. Her glare turned from one of disbelief to one of pure fury. Yeongha was conveniently preoccupied with examining his cigarette.

"Did he now? How interesting." Hikaru said, sweetly, brow twitching.

"Yes, very. I for one, wouldn't mind playing a game against him." Ogata commented, idly.

By her side, Sai lit up like it was Christmas- which, after a moment of deliberation, Hikaru realized was perfectly well warranted. It was actually Christmas, after all.

"Ogata-Judan would brave the net for SAI, huh?" The old man chuckled.

Ogata scowled. "I would prefer to play him in person. I can't stand netgo."

"There is something to be said about playing your opponent in person." Yeongha agreed, amiably. "There's so much of the game you miss without it. But, it's an opportunity to play SAI nonetheless"

"How *did* you manage to get onto SAI's server, anyway?" Ogata asked, sounding heavily invested.

Yeongha brushed it off impressively; "I played Sung Jinwoo for the Chunweon title and lost, but he invited me to play on his server anyway. I didn't use it much at first, but once SAI started playing on there too I became more active on it."

Ogata sighed. "So, luck of the draw, more or less?"

"Ah, so even the current Chunweon has played SAI then?" The old man scratched his chin, looking thoughtful.

Hikaru blinked rapidly. She had? She turned to Yeongha questioningly. Yeongha gave a half-shrug. Hikaru was surprised, even though she probably shouldn't be; Yeongha had never told her the other players on their server, and she had never asked. All the same, Sai had commented they were all incredible players. Some more than others, though.

" *Chunweon... that's the equivalent of the Tengen.* " Hikaru noted. " *Ne, Sai, who do you think that could have been?*"

" *A title holder, hm?*" Sai mused, floating in wide circles in a way that meant he was thinking deeply. " *I would have to imagine it to be that ShadowLord character. He's the best on the server.*"

ShadowLord, really? Hikaru shook her head. Honestly, the things people chose as their usernames... At any rate, no one would guess the current Chunweon would be playing under a name like that.

"He hasn't won once." Yeongha affirmed, nodding.

"Bah! Seiji-kun, you'll have to get me one of these computer things one of these days; I want to play SAI myself and see just how good he really is."

Ogata raised a cool brow. "Ah, even the Honinbo himself would brave the net for SAI, hmm? My, how the tables have turned."

Hikaru gasped. "You're the Honinbo?!" She exclaimed, delighted.

The wizened old man squinted at her, before grinning broadly. "Yes, indeed! Honinbo Kuwabara, that's me!"

"That's so cool!" Hikaru gasped, excited. " *Did you hear that, Sai? This is the current Honinbo!*"

Sai was just as ecstatic as she was. " *That's amazing! Hikaru, Hikaru, we've got to play him! Ask him for a game!*"

Hikaru paused. " *Ahh... I'm not sure how to go about doing that though without revealing who I am...*"

Sai pouted.

" *But it sounds like he really wants to play you,*" Hikaru tried to console him. " *I'm sure we'll find a way...*"

As if sensing Hikaru's crescendo of excitement and subsequent crushing resignation, Yeongha turned to the Honinbo and said, nonchalantly; "If you really want to play SAI, I can probably set it up for you."

"Really?" This came from the Judan, who bolted upright from his slouch against the railing.

Yeongha just nodded. "Sure. Give me your emails. SAI doesn't respond a lot of the time, but he does set up matches on occasion. They need to be scheduled well in advance though."

"That works better for us anyhow," Ogata replied. "What with tournament schedules being what they are. Alright old man, I'll set you up with an email and everything. You just tell me what works best."

"No need." The Honinbo waved him off. "I'll just use my granddaughter's account. She plays netgo."

Ogata snorted. "You're going to end up playing under a name like *SailorMoon123*. " He pointed out, uncharitably.

The Honinbo just looked enthused. "Well, you've got to throw these young ones a curveball every now and then, don't you?"

"I think it's a really great idea," Hikaru said, genuinely, surprising all of them. She blushed, not expecting all that attention all at once. "Well, it's just- Go is about bridging the past and the future, right? I think netgo is as good a place to do that as any. I think it's really wonderful that you guys would join in, even if it's not your preferred method of playing. It's really an excellent opportunity to further Go around the world."

They all looked strangely humbled by her words.

She chuckled weakly. In hindsight, that was a rather bold statement to be making as someone who didn't actually play the game.

But Sai was nodding along vigorously. " *That's exactly right, Hikaru!*"

Still, with everyone staring at her like this it was hard *not* to lose her nerve. "Haha~ but then again, what do I know?"

"No, the young miss is right." The Honinbo conferred, with a shake of his head. "More than just our titles, we are the bridge between our generation and the next. One day, this world of ours will belong to the youth, is that not right, Ko Yeongha-kun?"

Yeongha looked caught off guard that the Honinbo even knew his name. He appeared to think on it as he took another inhale from his cigarette. "Well, I don't expect you to just hand it over without a fight." He replied, mildly.

The Honinbo laughed to the point he almost started wheezing. Ogata made a move to help him, but the old man all but shoved him away. "Ha! What guts you have, kid! As if I'd ever let anyone take this title of mine! They'd have to pry it out of my cold, dead hands! Let me tell you, not just anyone can be the Honinbo!"

Sai was still nodding with great vehemence, looking to be in total and absolute agreement with the old man. Hikaru was fairly sure he'd found a kindred spirit in the cagey old bat. " *That's right! The Honinbo is sacred!*"

" *Yes, it is sacred, isn't it?*" Hikaru mused, feeling somewhat forlorn. That was Sai's title, once upon a time. Torajiro's title.

Hikaru felt her breath catch. She wondered if it was just the smoke, or maybe an incoming headache. Her stomach rolled over. She wasn't sure what she was feeling; nausea? Or excitement? No, she'd experienced this sensation plenty of times- in the breathless moment as the lights dim and the crowd roars; the speakers rev to life and the baseline pulses through the stadium.

Anticipation.

It feels like anticipation.

Track 16:

One Shot, Two Shot

BoA 

"You're *really* trying to argue with me here that *Electric Shock* isn't the catchiest tune on that album?"

Ochi bemoaned his life.

On one side of his seat was Imai Lisa, the purported Ice Queen of Kaio; Ochi had to admit the title was probably well warranted, she was quite stunning and also appeared to have an equally stunning disregard for other people's feelings. Saeki had tried to ask her out within fifteen minutes of meeting her and she'd shot him down cold. That hadn't stopped her from arguing with him over Touya's alleged girlfriend, the k-pop sensation Cy. On the other was a boy he knew quite well- Saeki Koji, *shodan*. A very surprising tenant for a closet k-pop fanboy.

Saeki was shaking his head rapidly. "No way. *La Cha Ta* is the best song on the album- hell, it's named after it!"

"I have nothing against *La Cha Ta*- I think it's a great song. I'm just saying, *Electric Shock* is just... catchier, you know? It gets stuck in your head. It makes you want to dance." Imai-san narrowed her eyes at Saeki, and then a devilish smirk grew on her face. "Admit it, you've *totally* danced to it."

Saeki floundered. "What? No? Who- who would even manage to dance to it?! It's not exactly easy!"

"Ah, so you've *tried* huh?" Imai crooned, smirk widening.

"Why are we even arguing this at all?" This question came from Nase Asumi, turned around in the chair in front of him. At first, Ochi looked at her with nothing but unadulterated relief. Then she continued; "Their best album is *Four Walls* . Hands down. *La Cha Ta* was all kitschy pop tunes, nothing super original."

Ochi deflated. He was holding out hope Nase might manage to steer the conversation back into the direction it was supposed to be going- the tournament games.

Hazawa-san- Tsugumi-chan, she had insisted earlier- raised her hand meekly. "... I really liked *Heart Attack*. "

Uehara- *Call me Himari-chan, or Hii-chan if you prefer!*- nodded resolutely. "Yeah, just because it's y'know, what you'd expect from a girl's pop album doesn't make it any less of a fun album!"

"That's true." Nase agreed, folding her arms as she tapped her chin. "But, I just think *Four Walls* really turned them from pop sensations into real artists, if you know what I mean?"

Ochi sighed deeply. He had a feeling they were never going to get around to actually discussing any games. He should have known. To his left, Isumi seemed to somehow be taking this all in stride. He knew the other pro was rather easy-going by nature, but really, how could he stand this?

Fujisaki Akari smiled, leaning over him. "I totally agree. *La Cha Ta* was great, but *Four Walls* definitely showed growth from a musicality standpoint in a lot of ways. I think the songs were more mature, and the beats were more complex, and they just took more risks on it and veered off the usual girls group formula."

Ochi reeled back. She was... way too close. He could smell the soft scent of her flowery perfume.

"And then there's Cy-chan's solo album- I think we can all agree that's the best one, hands down."

At this, all the girls nodded in agreement. Ochi really hoped this would be the end of it.

But then Fujisaki-san looked down at her phone, and then looked around. She got up from her chair, examining the crowds still sequestered about the room, where people were staying behind to recreate the games from earlier. It wasn't as full as it had been earlier, but it was still quite crowded. She stood up on her tiptoes; whoever she was looking for, she hadn't found them yet.

"What is it, Akari-rin?" Tsugumi asked, peering up at her.

"Hikaru said she was going to stop by," Akari said, to the delight of the girls- and Saeki. "I don't see her though."

"Psst! Akari!"

Akari whirled around. Shindou Hikaru stood behind her, a face mask covering the bottom half of her face, in addition to a generous and voluminous scarf that covered just about all the rest.

"Hikaru!" Akari lept at her, wrapping her in a fierce hug. "I was wondering where you were! You said you'd be here!"

"Sorry, I- uh, got pulled into watching it somewhere else." Hikaru hedged off, apologetic. "I'm so sorry. Did you guys manage to catch the games?"

"Yes, they were awesome!" Tsugumi enthused. Then she paused, and added, sheepishly. "I didn't understand much of them... but the atmosphere was really intense!"

"Yeah, I totally wasn't expecting it to be like this!" Himari agreed. "It was actually super cool."

"They should do more tournaments like this." Lisa agreed. "They're really pretty fun."

"It is nice that it's open to the public, isn't it?" Hikaru concurred. "I wish they'd do this with regular title matches."

Then she peered over the girls, smiling in their direction. "Ah! If it isn't Asumi-chan! And Isumi-san and Ochi-san! Nice to see you again!"

Ochi was flabbergasted she even remembered her name. Isumi recovered himself first, dipping his head in greeting. "It's nice to see you too, Hikaru-san," then he paused. "Or, do you prefer Shindou-san? Or Cy?"

In hindsight, just calling her Hikaru-san seemed far too impolite. And yet, she'd only introduced herself as Hikaru when they'd originally met. Probably because Hikaru was a rather common name, whereas *Shindou Hikaru* was rather well-known as Cy.

To her credit, Hikaru-san- or Cy- took it in stride. "Honestly, Hikaru is fine. It feels weird when people who know me in real life use my stage name."

"Ah, Hikaru-chan! You did so well this morning!" Nase interrupted, leaning over to hug the other girl tightly. "And I totally *adored* your outfit! The performance was amazing!"

"Oh, you think so? Thank you! I was so worried it was going to rain and ruin all the technician's hard work- not to mention the hair and makeup artists." She laughed it off. Still, it felt nice to hear someone's pure and honest opinion.

"That's right, Hika-chii was on TV Tokyo's Christmas day special!" Himari gasped, sounding horrified. "I forgot to record it!"

Tsugu talked her off the ledge, smiling sheepishly. "It's alright, Hii-chan, I have it recorded. We can watch it together."

"I can always send you a copy. I'll sign it too!" Hikaru assured her. "And I'll be on Idol Net two weeks from now, same setlist."

Himari was looking at her like she was the light of her life- that might not even be a real exaggeration here. "Hika-chi... you're too kind..." She sniffled, dramatically, before also launching herself at the other girl.

What is with girls and dramatics? Ochi thought, annoyed. And further, how in the hell did Touya Akira of all people manage to suffer through this every lunch period? Ochi clearly hadn't given him enough credit for trying to teach this rowdy crew of girls Go. The man must have the patience of a saint.

Unfortunately for Ochi, the dramatics were far from over.

By his side, his fellow Go professional, Saeki Koji, a grown adult man, looked halfway to tears.

"It's Cy-chan... It really is Cy-chan... I can't believe I get to meet her in person..."

Hikaru blinked a few times, registering then that there was a new person she hadn't met before in the group. He looked like he was a friend of Asumi's; probably another go player. And a fan, from the look of it. Hikaru put on her best idol smile.

"Yep! I'm Cy-chan. It's really nice to meet you too! What's your name?"

He looked so stunned that she'd actually directed a question towards him that he didn't seem able to respond. Nase elbowed him in the side, hard. She chuckled weakly. "This is Saeki Koji- he's a *shodan* . He's also a fan of yours, if that wasn't super obvious." She added, rolling her eyes.

Hikaru was well used to interacting with fans though, and just took it in stride, beaming cheerfully. "That's wonderful! It's always so nice to meet fans!"

She's absolutely impossible to read, Ochi noted with disbelief, as he regarded her carefully.

He wasn't entirely sure what he expected of seeing the girl for the first time- and actually giving her the careful inspection she probably deserved. He'd brushed her off as one of Nase's friends the first time, but he wouldn't make such a mistake this time. She hadn't said much at that time, but what she *did* say had been completely on the mark. Even now, every word out of her mouth seemed effortlessly and yet meticulously crafted. Delivered with exacting execution; she was friendly, welcoming, but still perfectly poised. There was nothing out of place. Everything was what she wanted others to see.

Ochi wondered if all idols were like this; he'd never met any idols up until now, so he had no idea. He could imagine that having the spotlight so conclusively fixed on you all the time would lead you to watch your every move, but this level of self-awareness was actually impressive, if one knew to even look for it to begin with. He wasn't even sure if anyone else in this crowd was even aware she was doing it, or if they had fallen under the illusion.

She must be a surprisingly good Go player, he thought, unfathomably. But that sort of detailed awareness of both yourself and the world around you was *exactly* what made a good Go player into a *great* Go player.

"-totally happy to sign anything! I do have to get going though. I promised my jii-chan I'd stop by his house for this neighborhood party." Cy was in the middle of saying, brushing back a curl of silky blonde hair in a way that seemed casual, but was probably just as fastidiously curated as the rest of her.

"Oh, I'm so sorry! We didn't mean to keep you." Fujisaki apologized profusely.

Cy just shook her head, smiling softly. "It's totally fine, Akari! I'm so happy I got to see you guys. Will you be here tomorrow as well?"

Maybe she's worth further inspection, Ochi decided, filing the thought away for later. She had to play Go after all- there was no way a guy like Touya Akira could date someone (?) who didn't even know how to pick up a stone. Still, he also would have assumed there was no way a guy like Touya Akira could date a *pop star*. Ochi was beginning to seriously wonder if he'd entirely misjudged the other pro.

Lisa winced. "Japan doesn't play tomorrow, right?"

"I have to help my parents out at our coffee shop," Tsugumi said, apologetically.

Himari didn't even bother with the pretense. "I'm just here to support Touya-kun! If he's not playing, I don't really see why I'd go."

"What about you Hikaru-chan? Are you going to go?" Nase asked, curiously.

Cy nodded resolutely, swooping blonde curls bouncing with the movement. She was obnoxiously pretty, Ochi conceded. He could see why Saeki was all but drooling after her. "Oh, definitely! I'm also friends with Ko Yeongha and Hon Suyeong- so I want to support them too."

The girls looked surprised. Uehara gasped, delighted. " *Oh!* Ko Yeongha- that's the *really* cute one, isn't it?"

Imai-san's eyes lit up with recognition. "Oh, yeah, *that one*. He looks like he could be a k-pop idol himself."

Cy just rolled her eyes. "Oh, sure. He looks like a real prince charming- until he opens his mouth, that is."

Akari giggled. "You seem pretty close to him, Hikaru."

Cy just shrugged. "I guess." She said, evasively. And then, before any of the girls could comment further, she effectively steered the conversation off course; "We should go to a cafe after the Korea vs Japan game! I haven't done that in ages!"

The girls were all waylaid by that, whatever questions they had on the cute Korean boy overtaken by their excitement to go to a cafe with Cy-chan of all people.

"Yes, definitely!" Akari agreed. "I'll text you, okay? And say hello to your ojii-chan for me!"

"Will do!" Hikaru waved, and with a wink and swirl of blonde hair, she was off.

Hikaru flopped onto her back, wincing when she realized she'd just dropped onto a nest of bobby pins. She fished out a few, before she got too exhausted with the effort and just gave up on it. The floor of her grandfather's shed was nice and cool- not overly warm like the rest of his house.

She'd just managed to finagle her grandfather into returning back to his own house to rest for the evening, after he'd drank himself into a stupor during the majority of the day. The neighborhood party had been a hit, apparently, and while Hikaru was happy her aging grandfather was still a social butterfly, she really worried over his health. He'd been coughing all day, according to the gossipy *baa-chan's* down the street, and Hikaru had managed to get him to bed with a promise to take some medicine with his tea.

Her eyes slipped shut.

She was hardly in any position to be nagging other people about their health.

" *Hikaru? Hikaru~ Come on, you can't sleep here!*" Sai peered over her, pouting.

Her eyes fluttered open, and she pushed herself off of the shed floor. "I'm not sleeping." She said, half-heartedly.

She wasn't even all that tired. She'd downed a hot milk tea from the drink machine down the block, and now she had that weird, wired energy that came from being tired but also shocked awake by caffeine. At any rate, it wasn't really late enough to go to sleep yet- unless you were somewhat sick and approaching geriatric, like her grandfather. The neighbors were still out in full on the other side of the backyard wall.

" *We should sleep.*" Sai said, as he floated up to the place his goby had been hiding away for all these years. " *It's been a really long and hectic day, no? We should go back to your ryokan now.*"

Hikaru chuckled under her breath at the idea of the Ritz-Carlton being considered a humble 'ryokan'. Then she rolled her eyes. "As if *you're* actually tired. I know you're just itching to play a game."

Sai looked bashful. " *Well yes, of course, seeing such wonderful passion always makes me want to play,*" he admitted. " *But Hikaru's health is important too!*"

Hikaru knew that was true, but all the same, she felt as if it was just as important that Sai get to play. Maybe it was from seeing the excitement SAI caused in the Go world first hand- she had known at least peripherally that SAI was considered something of a Go God in the modern world, but to hear that both Ogata Judan and Kuwabara Honinbo would happily brave the internet just for a chance to play him...

As if by some minor stroke of fate, her phone began to buzz in her pocket.

When she pulled it out, her eyes lit up at the name. "Akira-kun!"

"Hikaru-chan," he said, and he sounded rather relieved. "Am I interrupting something right now?"

"No, not at all!" She assured him, smiling into the phone.
"Congratulations, by the way! It was a really great game!"

Akira chuckled weakly. "Thank you... Lu Li is a really great player. On the subject of that..."

He trailed off, and Hikaru waited patiently for what she knew was coming.

"... Would it be possible... would you like to come over?"

Hikaru almost dropped her phone.

Okay, *that* hadn't been what she'd expected.

"I'd really like to discuss the game with you," Akira continued, and Hikaru remembered to breathe. Yes, *that* had been what she had been expecting. Of course. He'd just... surprised her with the phrasing, was all. "But I understand if it's already too late."

"Not at all!" Hikaru assured. Then she remembered her sick and elderly grandfather in the house, and winced. "Ah- actually though... my grandfather appears to be under the weather, and I'm really worried about leaving him here alone..."

"That's perfectly understandable." Akira assured her.

Hikaru bit her lip.

"Why don't you come here?" She said, quickly.

"..." It appeared she had caught Akira conclusively off guard.

"I just- his house isn't too far from yours, if I recall correctly. And he has a goban."

When she put it like that, it was actually not a half bad idea.

"Is that really alright?" Akira asked, worried. "I wouldn't want to intrude."

"Of course, I promise!" Hikaru assured him. "And I really want to discuss the games with you, too, so this is perfect."

Akira still didn't seem quite convinced, but clearly he felt the same, because he caved quickly enough. "Well, if you're sure it's alright..."

"Definitely." Hikaru nodded. "I'll text you the address, okay?"

**the Kaio girls (Tsugumi, Himari and Lisa) call Hikaru Hika-chii as a nickname. It's a thing hs girls do with their friends, like Tsugumi is Tsugu, Himari is Hii-chan, and Akari is Akari-rin. Adding -chi, -rin or -chin is a way of making the names 'cuter' in some way I guess.*

**idk if this is right, but for whatever reason whenever I read manwha they tend to use people's full names as opposed to just a last name when they're being formal in Korean? Not sure if this is true or not. I also can't get a definitive answer on whether to use -nim or -sshi.*

** Across the Universe (천국까지) by Yerin Baek(백예린) might be one of the most beautiful songs I've ever heard? her voice is just so beautiful? Also all the chapters are songs that Hikaru will sing at some point in the story, or has already sung with f(x) or in her mini album 3*

thanks again to everyone who reviewed! This chapter would not have gotten out so quickly (or been here, at all) without you! For everyone who said the update made their day - well, you guys make my day too :)